

ryō shirakome
takaçaki

#12

ARIASURETA:

ARIURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAI SAIKYOU

FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST



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"LEVEL IX!"



"ERI, I-I'M
GLAD WE
WERE BEST
FRIENDS! EVEN
IF IT WASN'T A
REAL FRIEND-
SHIP, I REALLY
DID ENJOY
THE TIME I
SPENT WITH
YOU!"

"GOODBYE,
SUZU. THE
TIME I SPENT
WITH YOU WAS
THE ONLY TIME
IN MY LIFE I
EVER FELT
EVEN A LITTLE
HAPPY."

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER I: GOD'S DOMAIN

CHAPTER II: AN OUSTRETCHED HAND

CHAPTER III: THEIR OWN ENDINGS

CHAPTER IV: THE WHITE DRAGON AND THE PLATINUM APOSTLE

CHAPTER V: RAGNAROK

CHAPTER VI: SHEA HAULIA'S UTTER DOMINATION OF THE PLATINUM APOSTLES

CHAPTER VII: ADVENT OF A DRAGON GOD

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EXTRA CHAPTER: AN AFFECTIONATE CHALLENGE FOR THE VAMPIRE PRINCESS

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Prologue

The world was dyed crimson, and a yawning abyss spewed miasma into the broken sky. A flood of monsters and apostles crowded together thick enough to blot out the stars. It really did look as though the end of the world was at hand. But the mortal races that stood against the torrent of devastation remained undaunted.

“Uoooooooooooooh!”

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Spirited battle cries rang across the battlefield, signaling the united resolve of Tortus’s residents. Not a single one of the warriors gathered was lost in despair. They had all chosen to fight their way through this to make the future they believed in a reality.

Seeing their burning spirits from high up in the sky, Kaori muttered, “Well, after what they just saw, they better be in high spirits.”

Though Kaori was still in the body of an apostle, Hajime had used metamorphosis magic to make her hair and wings a glossy black instead of silver. Her dress was mostly black as well, befitting her new station as Hajime’s apostle.

Shortly after the battle had begun, Hajime had used his Gravity Meteors’ Meteo Impact to obliterate the sacred mountain. He’d also used his seven Pulse Hyperions to cleave through the army of apostles.

Kaori grinned as she thought back to how effortlessly Hajime had made mincemeat out of the hoard of apostles. Then, spinning around, she looked at the sky above her and stared at the gate leading into Ehit’s sanctuary. It truly did look like a path into the abyss, but Hajime and her other comrades had dived headfirst into it to save Yue.

Kaori had absolute faith that Hajime, Shea, and Tio would succeed.

“Yue, there’s still so much I need to tell you. You better get back here quick, or I’ll have to drag you home myself.”

Kaori still had more losses than wins in their regular spats over Hajime, and she wouldn’t rest until she took the lead. But while she kept her tone light, she really did hope her feelings reached her one and only rival in love.

“Shizuku-chan, Ryutarou-kun, Suzu-chan...”

Her three other friends had gone to rescue Kouki Amanogawa, another one of her childhood friends, who’d been unwilling to accept reality and had let himself be brainwashed in order to escape it. And Suzu, in particular, had gone to save her best friend, the girl who’d betrayed everyone for her own desires—Eri Nakamura.

Despite all that Eri had done, Suzu couldn’t just abandon her best friend. She didn’t want to be the kind of person who gave up on the people she cared about. At the very least, Suzu wanted to speak to her one last time. Even if it was far too late, even if Suzu couldn’t save her best friend, she at least wanted to end things on her own terms. And honestly, Kaori fully understood how Suzu felt.

“I’ll protect this place for you while you’re all gone!”

Like Hajime, she was determined to crush every single one of Ehit’s schemes. She couldn’t let him have the last laugh. But even more important than that, in her eyes, she needed to safeguard the home everyone would be returning to. That was the mission Hajime had tasked her with.

The army of apostles looked down, then streaked toward the ground like a barrage of shooting stars. Kaori brandished her two new claymores and shouted, “You want to destroy humanity? Hmph, I’d like to see you try!”

Copying her beloved Hajime’s catchphrase, she flashed them a fearless grin.

Chapter I: God's Domain

If someone asked Eri Nakamura what her most vivid, unforgettable memory was, she would answer: "The moment my dad died."

She had been six when her father had passed away. She was in the way of an oncoming car when her father had jumped in to protect her, and he had died in her place. It was the kind of boring accident you heard about on the news all the time. But to Eri, it had been far from a boring event. Especially because of how her mother's attitude had changed afterward.

Eri's mother had been from a well-off family, and she'd married Eri's father against their wishes. Those who knew the family would say Eri's mother's obsession with her husband bordered on complete dependence.

Unsurprisingly, Eri's mother had been unable to bear the shock of losing him. However, the manner in which she broke was what made this story so tragic. For in her despair, she'd channeled her rage at her own daughter, Eri.

At first it was just a snide remark here or there, but before long, it evolved into physical and verbal abuse. Eri did her best to bear the pain...because even at the tender age of six, she understood where her mother was coming from when she said it was all Eri's fault. Indeed, Eri even believed it herself. After all, if not for her, her father would still be alive. It was only natural that her mom hated her. It was only natural that her mother wanted to hurt her.

At the same time, however, Eri also believed that if she weathered the pain, then eventually her mother would return to being the gentle woman she'd known.

Eri's mother was discreet about how she hurt her, and Eri herself never said a word to her teachers or the adults around her, so no one ever learned the twisted nature of the pair's relationship.

It was inevitable that Eri eventually stopped smiling. In time she became a dark, gloomy girl who simply took whatever abuse her mother dished out and bore it.

Most of the kids her age thought her creepy and avoided her. And naturally, she was unable to make friends. The isolation only served to deepen her self-loathing and gouge even deeper wounds into her already scarred heart.

She was nearing her limit when she was hit with yet another devastating blow. When she was eleven, in fifth grade, she discovered her mom had brought home another man. Eri watched in shock as her mother gushed over her thuggish new boyfriend. She couldn't believe it. Eri had thought her mother had hurt her because she'd loved her father so deeply. And in a way, that had, of course, been true, but Eri's mother had been even weaker than Eri had thought. She simply couldn't survive without depending on others.

From that day on, this new man began to live in the Nakamura house. He was utter scum. Not satisfied with Eri's mother, he even set his lascivious sights on Eri herself. Eri had to make herself as small and unnoticeable as possible in order to survive, but it wasn't enough, so in an effort to protect herself from the man, she'd cut her hair—which she'd grown out to emulate her beloved mother—short and started acting more like a boy. Unfortunately, that caused her peers at school to distance themselves even more. While she hadn't had any real friends, her classmates had at least talked to her from time to time before. But after her change, they avoided her like the plague. The increased isolation drove deeper cracks into Eri's wounded heart.

The sole thing keeping Eri from crumbling completely was the hope and belief that her mother would eventually return to her kind, old self. That lone ray of hope drove her forward. Of course, a part of Eri knew she was just deluding herself and that that day would never come. But in the deluge of despair she was drowning in, false hope was all she had to cling to.

No false hope could last forever, though. Three months after her mother had brought her new boyfriend home, he finally tried to make a move on Eri while her mother was out working.

In truth, Eri saw this as an opportunity. She had known this day would come eventually, and she hoped that if she screamed loud enough, the neighbors would catch the man in the act and the police would arrest him. With that, her hellish life with him would finally be over. Then her mom would finally remember the man she'd truly loved, and she'd go back to being herself.

However, after the nightmare was over and her mother came back and saw what had happened, Eri realized she'd been a fool to believe. Instead of worrying about her daughter or apologizing for bringing home such an awful man, she instead showered Eri with hate.

To this day, Eri still remembered the first words her mother said to her back then: "How could you seduce him, you bitch?!" Instead of realizing her boyfriend was an awful person, Eri's mother thought she had once again stolen her man away from her.

At last, Eri saw the truth for what it was. The mother who'd betrayed her father, the mother who kept hurting her after her father had died, the mother who cared more about losing her new boyfriend than the fact that she'd been raped, did not love her one bit.

In truth, Eri had known this for a while, but she'd been unwilling to face the truth. She hadn't wanted to accept that her old, kind mother

would never return. That this spiteful, jealous woman was her mother's true nature.

Everything Eri had believed in was a lie. There had been no meaning to enduring this pain for so long...and the future held absolutely no hope at all.

At that moment, Eri's heart shattered completely, and she lost consciousness. When she woke up the next morning, she snuck out of the house, intending to kill herself. She couldn't stay by her mother's side any longer.

In a fugue state, she stumbled over to a nearby bridge that crossed the river. And as she looked down at the flowing water below, she decided this would be where she'd end it. She hoped the current would carry her away somewhere where there wouldn't be any people.

However, as she climbed onto the railing and prepared to leap off it, a voice interrupted her, saying, "What are you doing?"

Turning back, Eri caught sight of a boy around her age. He was wearing a sweatshirt and was clearly in the middle of a morning jog. Eri knew him quite well, since he was the school's most popular boy, Kouki Amanogawa.

Seeing the despair in Eri's eyes, Kouki guessed that she was liable to hurt herself and quickly dragged her down from the railing. In a patient voice, he asked her what had happened.

At first Eri ignored him, but Kouki was so persistent that, eventually, she gave in. She gave him a brief summary of her mess of a life, and Kouki, in standard Kouki fashion, interpreted events in his own way. He thought that Eri had been harshly disciplined by her father and that she had turned to her mother for salvation, but her mother had scolded her as well. Since Eri had no friends she could rely on to help her through this depressing time, she'd decided to kill herself.

On a basic level, Kouki's interpretation wasn't completely off the mark. Young as he was, and still naively believing that all humans were fundamentally good, Kouki simply wasn't able to comprehend that people like Eri's mother or her pedophile boyfriend might exist. And so, he'd reinterpreted events in his mind in a way that fit his worldview.

Believing completely in his own brand of justice, Kouki had flashed Eri his perfect smile and said, "Don't worry; you're not alone anymore. I'll protect you, Eri."

Eri's life until that point had consisted of being told over and over that she was worthless, so hearing someone say that he'd protect her was a novelty. Indeed, she was so starved for any kind of affection that Kouki's declaration had a huge impact on her. It helped that Kouki looked like a handsome prince, and he'd appeared at the dramatic moment right as Eri had been about to kill herself.

In the end, Kouki managed to convince Eri not to kill herself, and when she was forced to go to school by her mom, she discovered that all the girls in the class were suddenly talking to her. Afterward, she found out that this, too, had been Kouki's doing. Unsurprisingly, she fell madly in love with him as a result.

In the same way that bad things had kept on piling up one after another thus far, good things started piling up instead. A few days later, child protective services finally showed up to investigate her mother's abuse. It seemed her attempted suicide had brought attention to the fact that something might be wrong at home.

However, instead of ratting her mother out, Eri did her best to put on the good daughter act, even though it had made her want to puke. She knew that if she was separated from her mom, she wouldn't be able to keep going to the same school.

Eri distinctly remembered her mother's reaction when she'd pretended to love her. At first, her mother's expression had been one of pure shock, but then it slowly morphed into one of fear.

It was then that Eri realized how simple it was to turn someone's world upside down and make them dance in the palm of her hand. Just by smiling at her mother instead of glowering darkly, she could force her to avert her eyes and fall silent. Once, Eri went up to her mother and whispered, "What should I steal from you next?" At that, her mother went deathly pale and ran screaming out of the house.

For her part, Eri was convinced this was all thanks to Kouki, the shining prince who'd sworn to protect her. It was because Kouki had rescued her that her world had changed. She believed that she was special and that she'd been chosen by this handsome prince. So long as she was with him, she was certain her life would be full of light and happiness.

Eri continued threatening her mother until she went off to live somewhere else and simply provided Eri with a monthly allowance. And once that happened, she began preparing to welcome Kouki to her side. However, what Eri didn't realize was that she'd misunderstood the kind of person Kouki was.

To Kouki, Eri was just another girl that a hero such as himself was supposed to save. And in his eyes, his job was done the moment he'd talked to his classmates and asked them to get along with Eri.

In the same way that the heroines the protagonist rescued rarely ever showed up in future arcs, to Kouki, Eri's arc was already done, so he no longer needed to interact with her.

Eri didn't realize that, though, and she found it strange that Kouki treated her the same as he did anyone else. Moreover, she'd failed to realize the other girls he'd saved weren't "special" to him either. She began to burn with jealousy, wondering why they were by his

side and not her. The suffering from her childhood had already shattered her heart to pieces, and all Kouki had done was tape the outside back together to make it look like she was okay. However, such a shoddy repair job couldn't hold, so Eri's broken heart shattered once more, this time sending her down a spiral of madness from which there was no escape.

"Didn't you say I wasn't alone anymore? Didn't you promise to protect me? So then, why are you saying the same thing to everyone else? Why aren't you looking only at me? Why won't you help me even though I'm suffering so much right now? Why are you smiling like that at other girls? Why do you look at me like I'm just another girl? Why why..."

A new kind of darkness began to envelop Eri's heart. She could feel herself sinking into a pit of jealousy, slowly drowning until nothing—

"E...ri... Eri... Eri!"

Eri was suddenly snapped out of her reminiscing. Feeling as though a great weight had been lifted off her shoulders, she savored the choking cries, the faint smell of sweat and blood, and the raw sensation of flesh on her palms.

"Whoops."

Realizing what was happening, Eri loosened her muscles. Then she watched as Kouki coughed painfully underneath her. It seemed she'd unconsciously started choking him.

Ugh... I can't believe I had such an unpleasant dream. Why'd I dream about the past now, of all times? Am I just nervous about the end of the world?

Still straddling Kouki, Eri watched impassively as he gasped for air.

For all her purported love for Kouki, she seemed quite dispassionate when she looked at him. It was almost as if she'd turned into an apostle in both body *and* soul.

"E-Eri? Are you okay?"

A normal person would have yelled at Eri for trying to choke them, but Kouki was genuinely worried for her well-being. There was no fear, anger, or even dissatisfaction in his voice. Eri couldn't tell if he was like that because of his own innate kindness or because she was manipulating his thoughts with Spirit Binding. Either way, she was satisfied with his response.

She gave him a beaming smile. But on her, even that perfect smile looked like a disparaging sneer.

"I'm fine, Kouki-kun. Sorry I choked you. That must have hurt."

"I'll be okay. You were having a nightmare, weren't you? I could hear you moaning in your sleep."

"Yeah, I was. I had a dream where they took you away from me and killed me."

Lying came as naturally as breathing to Eri, so she said that as she snuggled up to Kouki. Neither of them were wearing any clothes. Both of them were resting on a shoddy bed in a dilapidated room. The windows were broken, part of the ceiling had caved in, and cracks were running across the floor. Size-wise, the room was as big as a luxury hotel suite, but it was far too run-down for anyone to live comfortably in.

The sight of Eri, with her dirty gray hair, cuddling up to Kouki, who still acted like his kind self, yet had cloudy, unfocused eyes, in the middle of that decaying room felt at once fetishistic, lonely, and desperate.

“Don’t worry, Eri,” Kouki said, raising himself into a sitting position and curling his fingers into a fist. “I won’t let Nagumo have his way any longer. I’m going to break Shizuku and the others free of his brainwashing, then save all of our classmates. I’ll do whatever it takes to beat Nagumo, even if I have to get my hands dirty. He’s committed far too many evil deeds to be allowed to roam free.”

Kouki spat venom, venting all the dark feelings festering in his heart. He was fully convinced that he was right and that Hajime Nagumo was the root of all evil. He truly believed that killing Hajime would solve everything. In fact, he was certain that killing Hajime would make all his classmates trust him again, make all of his friends love him again, and bring everything back to the way it was before. There was absolutely no basis for that belief, but he fully believed it would bring him back into the light and turn him into everyone’s hero once more.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. We have to make him pay and all that,” Eri said as she got up and covered Kouki’s fist with her hands. But despite her gentle mannerisms, her gray eyes were glowing with a fierce light. “If that fiend shows up, you’ll protect me, right? You promised, remember?”

“Yeah, I will.”

“You’ll prioritize me over your classmates, your friends, and even your own feelings, right?”

“Well...”

“You promised we’d be together forever, didn’t you?”

“Y-Yeah...”

“Don’t worry. I’m on your side, Kouki-kun. In fact, I’m the only one on your side. I’m not like the others, who betrayed you. I’ll stand by you forever. I’ll help you whenever you need it,” Eri whispered sweetly into Kouki’s ear, her eyes glowing with a manic light.

Distinctly aware of the softness in his arms, Kouki's resolve to do whatever it took to "rescue" his classmates faded and he felt himself get sucked into Eri's gray eyes.

Of course, he still wanted to save his friends, but he also wanted to punish them for so easily being led astray by Hajime and betraying him. Conflicting feelings warred inside him, and he was no longer certain what course of action was "right." However, his own desire to have clear-cut answers to everything in life and Eri's Spirit Binding both subtly pushed him to conflate Eri's own desires with justice.

Kouki already tended to accept only the parts of reality that confirmed his viewpoint, making it easy for Eri's Spirit Binding to completely dominate him. He had been charmed by Eri's wiles and had willingly let himself get trapped in her web.

"Eri... Thanks. You're the only one who..."

"Yes? Go on."

She'd obviously guided him into saying this, but she still wanted to hear the words slip from his lips.

Unaware that he was being manipulated, Kouki said in an innocent voice, "You're...the only one who's special to me. No matter what happens, I won't leave your side. I'll protect you, Eri."

"He he he he he he he..."

"Eri? Mmmpf..." Kouki shot Eri a concerned glance, but before he could say anything, she pressed her lips against his. However, even that act made her look like a spider devouring her prey.

After a few minutes, she broke off the kiss, a glimmering line of saliva connecting their lips. Smiling faintly, Kouki closed his eyes and went to sleep.

The demi-apostleification had raised Kouki's stats, but his body had been resistant to the change. While he didn't possess the strength

full apostleification would have granted him, he was still a lot stronger than before. As a result, though, his body needed to rest frequently until it adjusted to his newfound power.

Eri wrapped a sheet around herself and left the bed. The sheet trailed along the floor behind her as she walked barefoot over to the broken window. Shards of glass crunched under her feet, but her apostleified body was far too tough to be damaged by mere glass.

Once she reached the window, she looked outside. The sky was rust-red and the city a ravaged ruin. A dry wind blew through the streets. This was the remains of one of the civilizations Ehit had toyed with, destroyed, and then transported to the realm of the gods to be preserved for all eternity.

The countdown toward the end of the world was almost over. Soon, all of Tortus, and then Earth, would end up like this ruined city.

"You'd better actually die this time around," Eri grumbled. Even under the effects of her Spirit Binding, Kouki was still unable to let go of his lingering desire to crush Hajime and rescue his friends. However, Eri had absolutely no interest in fighting Hajime. In fact, the last time she'd seen him, he had a gaping hole in his stomach and had been hit by Ehit so hard he was covered in wounds from head to toe. She'd thought for sure the monster of the abyss would die there, but she'd learned afterward from an apostle that he'd somehow made it out of that situation alive. And not only that, but he'd killed Alva in the process. It was unbelievable.

Hajime Nagumo was beyond Eri's comprehension. Common sense didn't seem to apply to him. There was no way she was going to risk a confrontation with him. Nothing good would come from getting mixed up with that cursed boy. The best possible move was to simply ignore him.

Eri doubted he'd be able to break through the gate leading to the Sanctuary, so he'd probably die with the rest of humanity when the wave of apostles rushed into their world.

He'd better die.

Eri had already made a deal with Ehit. Once Ehit had conquered Earth, as a reward for her efforts, he would gift her this city and no one, especially not Hajime and his friends, would ever bother her. Thankfully, she'd already done enough, so he didn't even want her to be part of the army that attacked Tortus.

Besides, even on the off chance that Hajime and his friends did make their way into the Sanctuary, she still wouldn't have to face them. This ancient ruin was the farthest away from the Sanctuary's gate, and it was astronomically unlikely that Hajime would run into her on his way to Ehit. Plus, she doubted he had any reason to seek her out. She knew Hajime Nagumo had zero interest in her or Kouki. He was a rational guy, and if his goal was to get his vampire princess back, he wouldn't waste time searching for her. And then, when he faced God, Ehit would simply strike him down. After all, for all Hajime's strength, he didn't stand a chance against Ehit.

Almost everything was working in Eri's favor here. Come what may, her victory was all but assured. And yet...

"Spread out in a one-kilometer radius. Keep an eye out for any intruders," she said to a gray-winged man standing outside her window.

The man showed no signs of life, and his body was a cobbled-together mess. He simply nodded silently, then started circling the ruins of the city. Other gray-winged figures leaped out of nearby skyscrapers to join him, and they spread out to set a perimeter around the ruins.

Eri couldn't afford to get complacent. Only after she'd killed everyone she didn't need, captured everyone she did, bound their very souls, and crushed their will to resist her would she be able to feel even a modicum of peace. She'd lost her trust in anyone or anything years ago.

"I'm putting my faith in you, God," she said with a sardonic grin. Though she looked like an apostle, she had about as much faith in Ehit as she did anyone else.

Turning on her heel, she returned to the bed and stared at Kouki's sleeping face. Then, after a few seconds, she lowered herself to his side and hugged him.

"We're going to be together forever and eeeeeever," she squealed as she wrapped all four of her limbs around him. "It'll be just us two alone in this world, with no one to interrupt us."

Eri smiled. She didn't realize it, but she looked just like her own mother, the woman she used to hate, which was precisely why she hadn't been able to believe in her only true friend, who she'd decried as a hypocrite. It was also why she couldn't fathom that Suzu might still come looking for her.

Eri had failed to notice the strength of her friend, who she'd cut off and humiliated. And so, of course, she never imagined that same friend was desperately fighting her way to Eri at that very moment in hope of conveying her feelings once more.

A vibrant burst of color was the first thing Hajime and the others saw when they first stepped foot into the Sanctuary.

It felt like they'd wandered into a soap bubble. Colors warped and blended together, and even the objects were fuzzy, having no clear outlines.

"Ugh, I think I'm gonna throw up," Suzu muttered, covering her mouth with one hand.

“Don’t focus too hard on any one thing...” Shizuku cautioned.

“Hey, Nagumo, is this really the Sanctuary?” Ryutarou asked, frowning. The group’s Skyboards were pretty beat-up from the turbulence they’d had to go through to get through the gate, but they were otherwise in good shape.



Hajime had needed to use both his inferior copy of the Crystal Key and the deprecated version of the Arrow of Boundaries that Miledi Reisen had given him to force his way into the Sanctuary. It had been a pretty rough entry, so Ryutarou was wondering if maybe they'd ended up somewhere else.

Hajime himself wasn't certain enough to readily dismiss Ryutarou's question, so he whipped out the Compass of Eternal Paths to check.

"No, this is definitely the Sanctuary."

Tio, who'd been keeping a wary eye on their surroundings, added, "With how many apostles were pouring out of the gates, I assumed we would have to face an army of them the moment we entered."

They had made it into the Sanctuary, but it seemed they'd ended up in a different area than where the apostles and monsters were waiting. It was a stroke of good fortune, but Hajime felt that there had to be a catch.

"It's quiet. There isn't even a single apostle in sight. Hell, the only thing here is..." Shea muttered, looking off into the distance. "That."

"Guess it's as good a place to land as any."

Far below the group, a single structure could be seen. It was a massive wall that was entirely white, but it was the only thing in this vibrant, colorful world that looked concrete. The top of the wall was wide enough to accommodate ten people standing next to each other. From there, a single path that seemed to stretch on for eternity led farther into this strange region.

Hajime nodded to his companions, and they all alighted on the wall. Everyone stored their Skyboards in their respective Treasure Troves, and then they all took out healing potions to help them recover from the minor wounds they'd received on their way in. While they were

waiting for the potions to do their work, Shea suddenly pulled an iron ball out of her Treasure Trove, walked over to the edge of the path, and dropped it.

“Whoa, I thought I could find out how far down this thing goes, but...”

“What happened?” Hajime asked.

“It didn’t get very far, Hajime-san. Feels like it got swallowed up.”

“Swallowed up by what?”

“No clue, but that’s the only way I can describe it.”

Indeed, the ball had been quickly swallowed up as if it had fallen into a swamp. Shizuku and Suzu had watched it happen as well. They shook their heads, making it clear that they agreed with Shea’s assessment, despite how strange it seemed.

“All I know is that nothing good is waiting for you if you fall,” Shizuku muttered.

“Let’s get outta here, Nagumo. I don’t like this place one bit,” Ryutarou added, shivering. He and the rest of the group naturally huddled in the center of the corridor.

“Sounds good to me. But keep your guard up, guys.”

With everyone’s wounds healed, the party began trekking down the seemingly endless corridor. Hajime took the lead, while Tio served as the rearguard.

For a while, the party advanced in silence. The only sound they heard was their own footsteps echoing against the white marble. The corridor was completely uniform, making it hard to judge distances. Hajime and the others felt like they were advancing. Their feet were taking them forward, at least. And yet, the unchanging scenery made them question if they really were making progress.

“H-Hey...we’re moving forward, right?” Suzu asked, slightly out of breath. She was the one with the lowest physical stats of the party, so she didn’t have much stamina.

“Yeah, we are. It’s slow going, but I can tell we’re getting closer to Yue.”

“Oh, I see...”

Suzu and Ryutarou both gave him exasperated looks, as if to say, “Are you really bragging about how strong your love for her is, even now?!”

“You know that because you’re checking the compass, right?” Shizuku asked.

“Knowing Hajime-san, he might really be able to sense how far away Yue-san is at any time,” Shea replied.

“I remember Yue once said, ‘I always know more or less where Hajime is and what he’s doing.’ I must say, even I was a little put off by that,” Tio murmured.

“It’s still not as creepy as your fetishes. Well, I won’t deny that she makes for a good guidepost. Nice going, Yue. Even in this situation, you’re able to guide me.”

“I knew it. You just wanted to brag about her again,” Suzu and Ryutarou said in tandem. They, of course, kept their guard up while they talked, but a little light banter helped keep them sane in this unchanging realm.

Knowing that they were indeed making progress helped Suzu and the others relax. After another ten minutes, Suzu shouted, “Look! I can see the end of the corridor!”

She couldn’t actually see what was there, just that there was an actual end to the corridor...and that was because it seemed to end at

a wall of pulsing color. However, they drew closer and closer to it, meaning it had to actually be the end.

Knowing that the journey was almost over brought Suzu and the others a measure of relief, and the moment they relaxed their guard, Shea's ears stood on end.

"We're about to get attacked from all sides!" she shouted, causing everyone to snap to attention once more.

Beams of shimmering silver light appeared out of nowhere, converging on the party from all directions.

It was a perfect surprise attack, which came at them right before the party reached their goal from a zone where it was hard to tell where or what anything was. Shea's Future Sight had saved them there, but the fact that it had activated unconsciously proved that without it they would all have likely died.

"Gather around me!" Hajime shouted to Suzu and Ryutarou, prompting the two to scurry over. Experience and instinct had both conditioned them to believe Hajime's side was the safest place to be. On the other hand, Tio, Shizuku, and Shea didn't even need to be told; they gathered around Hajime immediately.

Hajime's Treasure Trove glowed...and a second later, a coffin-shaped shield appeared in front of him. He grabbed it out of midair, and it began to glow a deep crimson as metal plates spread out from either side of it, creating a dome-shaped metallic barrier mere moments before the barrage of silver light struck the group.

"This is..." Shizuku muttered, trailing off as she watched the glowing crimson shield envelop her.

This was Hajime's shape-shifting shield artifact, Aideon. The metallic plates inside the coffin could be rearranged into any shape to defend against attacks from any and all directions. The glow of mana from

the shield made the inside of the barrier surprisingly bright. Shizuku could tell that Tio and the others looked as surprised as she did.

“Impressive. To think you managed to create a physical material that’s strong enough to block the apostles’ disintegration attacks...”

Those silver streaks of light were of course the apostles’ strongest attacks, their disintegration beams. Any object should have been turned into Swiss cheese by that barrage of beams, no matter how sturdy. However, Hajime’s creations were on a different level.

“Hmph, I’d like to see you try breaking through this shield!” he shouted, smiling fearlessly. He had utter confidence in his artifact. And indeed, Aideon was holding fast against that destructive barrage.

The world outside the shield was just a mass of shimmering silver light. There was no sound accompanying the disintegration attacks, and they did indeed seem to be wearing away at the surface of Hajime’s shield. And yet, they couldn’t break through it.

There were three reasons for that.

“Oh, I see! You enchanted the shield with restoration magic!” Shea exclaimed.

Yes, Hajime had created a new material that was innately enchanted with restoration magic, regenstone. He’d combined it with sealstone, which repelled magic, and azantium ore, the hardest metal in existence, to create a unique alloy. And he’d christened this alloy “repellite.” Not only was it extremely sturdy, but it also deflected magic and mana, and even if something did break through one layer of it, it regenerated fast enough to never be destroyed. Those three ores were the three reasons the apostles couldn’t break his shield. And as added insurance, Hajime had enchanted the whole thing with Diamond Skin.

After his near brush with death at the Demon Lord's castle where he'd unlocked the Transcendence skill, Hajime had grown strong enough to transmute even sealstone with ease.

"When they realize their bombardment isn't working, they'll come in to attack up close," Shizuku muttered calmly, gripping the hilt of her black katana.

"Everything happened so fast that I was unable to get a good look, but judging by the number of beams, it seems we're dealing with around twenty or so apostles," Tio added, coating herself in black scale armor. With her astute perception, she'd been able to roughly estimate the number of enemies despite having only a second of clear vision.

Ryutarou and Suzu stiffened upon hearing that number, squeezing their respective weapons tight. At the Demon Lord's castle, the two of them hadn't been able to even scratch an apostle, and in their earlier charge to the gate, they'd only been able to hold the apostles at bay thanks to the significant amount of ground support they received from the army below.

Can we handle apostles as we are now? No, we have to or we won't be able to accomplish our goals... Suzu thought, steeling her nerves.

"Hah. Twenty can't even slow us down!" Shea shouted, not at all daunted by the prospect of fighting twenty apostles at once.

"Let me handle these guys," Hajime said, his reassuring voice easing Suzu's and Ryutarou's nerves. "You guys protected me on the way to the gate, so now it's time I return the favor. Save your strength for the fights to come."

"H-Hajime?" Shizuku asked hesitantly. "You don't have to do this alone, really. We can work together to—"

“I don’t want to have to keep fighting these small skirmishes along the way. I need to make them realize that sending apostles in small groups like this is a complete waste of time.”

Upon seeing the feral gleam in Hajime’s eyes, Shizuku gave up on trying to convince him to let them help. Suza shivered a little, even knowing that Hajime was on her side.

“Don’t worry. This’ll only take a second.”

“A-A second?”

Hajime’s voice sounded extremely calm, but that only made him sound more terrifying to Suza and Ryutarou. Even Shea and Tio looked a little overwhelmed, but before anyone could say anything more, the beams stopped. The apostles had finally realized their concentrated barrage wasn’t doing anything.

Hajime stored Aideon in his Treasure Trove and saw the twenty apostles surrounding him from all sides.

Even though their strongest attack, granted to them by Ehit himself, had failed to scratch Hajime’s shield, they remained expressionless. However, plumes of silver mana erupted from all of them like a volcano, showing that they’d all activated their Limit Breaks. While their expressions remained unchanged, the silver sparks shooting off them seemed to be filled with rage due to the humiliation.

“The Irregular!”

“Kinda late to notice that now.”

The apostles brandished their claymores and flapped their wings in preparation to charge him, but before they could, Hajime swung his arms to both sides so fast that they couldn’t even be seen as a blur. A second later, there was a series of twelve sharp cracks, indicating that Hajime had emptied Donner’s and Schlag’s chambers.

“Wha—?”

Twelve streaks of light had each found their mark, shooting through the apostles' chests and destroying their cores. By the time they realized what had happened, the apostles were already tumbling down into the multicolored chasm below. The surviving eight were too shocked to move, which simply added to Hajime's advantages.

"Get down, you guys," Hajime said as he smoothly reloaded his revolvers.

"What did you do, Irregular?!" one of the apostles shouted in shock. They knew that Hajime's railgun-accelerated bullets were a threat already. Back during the confrontation at the edge of the Schnee Snow Fields, Hajime had blown a hole through both of an apostle's claymores with one shot. Donner and Schlag were certainly strong enough to damage even an apostle's absurdly sturdy body. However, an apostle's core, and the flesh surrounding it, was much tougher than the rest of their body. Hajime shouldn't have been able to destroy it without resorting to one of his bigger weapons like his pile bunker.

"Oh, I just made some armor-piercing bullets to deal with you guys," Hajime replied casually.

Traditional armor-piercing bullets were made by putting a hard metal core at the center of the bullet to increase its penetrating capacity. Hajime had used ultra-compressed, ultra-dense azantium for his bullets' cores. He'd also enchanted the softer outer layer with a spatial barrier.

Against most living creatures, the bullets' penetrative power was actually so high that they didn't cause much damage on their way through something, but they were perfect for destroying an apostle's core.

"But why were we unable to dodge them...?"

The apostles had actually managed to react to the shots. Though they hadn't been able to move much, they'd still twisted away to protect their cores from getting hit, which was why the remaining apostles couldn't fathom how they'd been hit in the cores anyway.

"Like I'm gonna tell you that," Hajime said, and the apostle's eyes widened as she tried to analyze Hajime's new weapon with her own abilities. Silver light flared around her and the other apostles, sending ripples through the multicolored space. A second later, more apostles popped up out of nowhere.

"Wait, now there's a hundred of them! Nagumo-kun, are you sure you're gonna be okay?!" Suzu exclaimed.

"W-Want some help?!" Ryutarou asked, pale-faced.

"Don't get cold feet now. I'll finish this up in thirty seconds."

Ryutarou's surprise was drowned out by the sound of several consecutive gunshots.

The battle that followed was more of a one-sided slaughter than anything. Hajime emptied both revolvers' chambers again, dropping another twelve apostles.

"Ah!"

The apostles didn't even have time to grit their teeth in frustration. Hajime reloaded and fired, then reloaded and fired again in the blink of an eye. Every single one of his bullets found its mark, dropping another twenty four apostles. Streaks of red light stretched out in every direction as Hajime picked apostles off from every side of the encirclement.

As the apostles could telepathically share their thoughts, they came up with a strategy quite quickly. They sheathed themselves in disintegration magic and rushed toward Hajime all at once, hoping to

overwhelm him with numbers. Their coordination was perfect, like a flock of birds in flight.

No matter how fast Hajime could reload, it didn't change the fact that he could only fire twelve bullets at a time. There was at least a fraction of a second he'd have to spend reloading. The apostles had a good chance of reaching him before he shot them all down. But of course, Hajime had already taken that one weakness into account.

He activated his perception-enhancing skill, Riftwalk. As his thought processing sped up dramatically, the world around him lost all its color. He could see each individual beat of each apostle's wings.

With everything else moving in slow motion, Hajime aimed with Donner and Schlag so that their bullets would collide right as they reached their target, then fired.

"Ngh?! This is spatial magic!"

Indeed, as the two bullets collided, they created a spatial shockwave that rapidly spread out. These were one of the specialty bullets that Hajime had devised, Area Burst Bullets. When he'd seen the apostles charging as one, he'd swapped out his regular bullets with them.

Even apostles would have trouble breaking through a spatial barrier immediately. Most of them were blown back as the barrier expanded, and their advance was halted for a few seconds.

Of course, a few seconds was all Hajime needed. He reloaded his revolvers and took out another twelve apostles. And by the time they'd recovered their formation, he'd finished reloading again.

A wave of unease spread through the apostles; they couldn't tell how Hajime was able to so accurately shoot them down. Even if he did possess a foresight skill, it shouldn't have been enough for him to accurately hit the apostles' cores when they were working so hard to dodge.

If we cannot evade his bullets, then we must cut through them... one of the apostles thought, and the others brandished their claymores in response. They slashed down at the next barrage Hajime sent their way with perfect reaction time. With their swords wrapped in a layer of disintegration magic, they should have been able to cut through any bullet, no matter how tough. However, all of their slashes missed.

Huh?! It slipped past—

Just before the apostle died, she finally realized how Hajime was hitting them every time. The bullet had changed direction slightly in midair to slip past the apostles' slashes. It had only changed its trajectory by a few millimeters to make it by the blade, then resumed its previous course.

These were another of Hajime's new bullets, Living Bullets. They were a product of both creation magic and metamorphosis magic. True to their name, the bullets were actually alive. They were a similar kind of being to the golems Hajime had given Myu. While they didn't possess full sentience, they could be ordered to recognize and evade any obstacles in their path, which was why the apostles couldn't avoid them or strike them down. The bullets weren't acrobatic enough to do complete U-turns in midair, but considering how fast they traveled, being able to make minor adjustments was more than enough. And as a result, even the lightning reflexes of the apostles weren't enough to save them.

When combined with their armor-piercing properties, Hajime's Living Bullets were the perfect counter to the apostles; especially since he already had impeccable aiming skills on his own, so the bullets only needed to course-correct a little bit.

"Tch, don't stop moving! Gain some distance and take him down with feather barrages!" one of the apostles shouted, though she didn't actually need to, since her thoughts were automatically shared

with her comrades at all times. She was feeling something she had never felt before, and she tried to shake off this new sensation as she flew backward so quickly that she left afterimages in her wake.

I can't shake him... she realized as she watched Hajime track her movements. Even though she was moving so fast that no human should've been able to perceive her, even though other apostles were flying around in all directions, Hajime kept his gaze focused on her, Sext, apostle number six.

Does he know I'm their commander? Sext thought. And a second later, she saw Hajime grin.

"Ah..." Sext gasped without even realizing it herself.

A streak of crimson light shot past the numerous apostles in front of her, avoided the barrage of arrows that was raining down on Hajime, and accurately pierced her chest. Time seemed to come to a halt for Sext, and not because of her Limit Break-enhanced senses.

So this is what mortals feel at the moment of their death...

Sext's life flashed before her eyes. She recalled all the secret maneuvering she'd done centuries past to remove unneeded pawns and kill those who'd displeased her master.

For a moment, she imagined all of their specters grinning triumphantly at her, relishing in her demise.

Unacceptable! I am the greatest—

Uncharacteristically bitter about her defeat, Sext disintegrated into light as her core was shattered.

"Prepare a stronger barrage! The rest of you, follow me!" another one of the apostles, Elft, shouted, immediately taking up command.

To the apostles, a commander wasn't much more than a glorified figurehead. They all possessed the ability to share their thoughts, so

the death of a commander didn't affect them in the slightest. They were able to swap tactics without any directed leadership.

Of the remaining apostles, fifteen split up into five groups of three. Scattering in different directions, they all pointed their swords at Hajime. Light started to coalesce at their claymores' points, which began to glow like mini-suns.

While these fifteen charged their attacks, the remaining apostles guarded them, using their wings and swords as shields and creating barriers of magic.

They used every tool at their disposal to focus on defense. However, Hajime didn't seem the least bit daunted.

"So that's your trump card? Go ahead. I'll let you shoot it at me," he said, firing a series of shots all at one apostle. His pinpoint accuracy allowed him to aim the bullets such that they all struck one spot at the same time, amplifying their penetrative power exponentially.

It took three shots to kill an apostle focusing fully on defense, so he could kill four with each reload cycle. Despite their outstanding defensive capabilities, Hajime didn't even need to rely on heavy weaponry to take the apostles down; his gunmanship alone was enough. However, due to their focus on defense, the apostles managed to buy enough time.

"Underestimate us at your peril, Irregular. That shield of yours won't be enough to protect you from this," Elft said in a cold voice.

A second later, the apostles swung their swords down at Hajime. Having charged their power to the limit, each group of three fired a single laser that was ten meters wide from their crossed swords. This blinding attack was so powerful that even the air in its path was annihilated upon contact.

Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou stiffened in fear, while Shea and Tio merely shrugged their shoulders.

“Don’t worry. I wasn’t planning on using it anyway,” Hajime replied as he took ten elliptical discs out of his Treasure Trove. They had holes in their center and five of them flew up to intercept the five beams. When they reached their destinations, they separated into three segments and split up, widening the hole in their center. Those three segments were still connected by wires, and they expanded until the holes were wide enough to swallow the lasers, then started glowing.

Only then did the apostles realize what was happening.

“That move—”

The apostles’ ultimate move was strong enough to destroy even spatial magic barriers, but the lasers were nevertheless swallowed into the five rings, then spit out by the other five. These were Hajime’s ultimate shapeshifting chakram, Orestes. He’d modified his original chakram—which had mostly been used to redirect bullets—to redirect enemy attacks as well. The way Hajime saw it, the ultimate defense was simply not getting hit in the first place.

Frowning slightly, the apostles recalled a time in the distant past when someone had used the exact same tactic against them. Though they swiftly moved out of the way of their own lasers, they weren’t able to dodge the bullets Hajime fired shortly after.

“It’s not over yet,” one of them said, and another group of apostles appeared from the other side of the multicolored space. But it didn’t matter how many came; they couldn’t do a thing.

“You said before that you’d analyzed me completely, didn’t you?” Hajime said as he redirected the feather storms and beam attacks the apostles shot his way. “Well, this time I’m the one who’s analyzed you.”

Whenever they tried to close in, Hajime pushed them back with his Area Burst Bullets.

“Twice you failed to kill me, and now you’re paying the price.”

And whenever they left themselves open for even a second, Hajime shot them down.

“Your weapons, your tactics, and your magic never change.”

Donner and Schlag were fired nonstop, with Hajime opening their chambers and reloading them with a quick spin anytime they ran out of bullets. He himself also spun around in circles, firing at apostles in all directions. His hands moved seemingly independent of each other as he aimed at angles that seemed impossible from the direction he was facing at the moment.

His movements were simple and precise, his fighting style maximizing efficiency. Each red streak meant another apostle dead, and they dropped like flies. A single apostle should’ve been strong enough to ravage all of Tortus, but they weren’t even a threat to Hajime any longer.

It was an awe-inspiring sight. Silver streaks fell to the ground like a meteor shower, and Shea, Tio, Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou were captivated by the display.

“But I used my imagination. I changed my weapons, polished my skills, adapted my tactics, and created as many trump cards as I could. What did you guys do?”

Eventually, reinforcements stopped pouring in. For the briefest of moments, the apostles stared at Hajime in awe, but then they returned to their emotionless state.

“Silence, Irregular. We are perfect creatures. Do not put us on the same level as you lowly humans who—”

Realizing that conversing with these puppets was pointless, Hajime shot the apostle down before she could finish speaking.

"You don't evolve. You don't know what it's like to fight desperately to survive, to fight to fulfill your dreams, or to fight for those you care about. I said it before, and I'll say it again..." Hajime trailed off, staring at the lone apostle left in the air. It was the tenth apostle, Twent. He pointed Donner's muzzle at her, a fearless smile on his face, and continued, "You're nothing more than empty puppets."

He pulled the trigger, and Twent didn't even bother to try to resist. But as she died, she muttered, "You monster..."



“Why thank you,” Hajime replied as he watched the final apostle plummet to the ground. He’d heard the insult so many times already that he saw it as a compliment.

Hajime spun his revolvers’ empty chambers one last time, reloaded them, then holstered them in one smooth motion. Looking over his shoulder, he saw Suzu and Ryutarou still crouching low while staring at him in awe. Shizuku gave him an exasperated smile, while Shea and Tio both gazed at him in admiration.

“Sorry, I ended up needing sixty seconds instead of thirty.”

Hajime scratched his head, sounding as if he thought that was the reason why everyone was staring at him.

“Nagumo-kun, I don’t think anyone minds that you took a little longer.”

“Yeah, you scared us out of our wits, dude.”

In total, Hajime had slain close to two hundred apostles, and he’d done so without taking even a single scratch. On top of that, he’d done the job in a minute. It had been a truly overwhelming display of might. Suzu and Ryutarou hadn’t realized Hajime was this strong when he matched his unparalleled gun skills with artifacts that took advantage of them.

“If anything, you should probably have amended that earlier statement to ‘You failed to kill me twice, and you gave me quite a bit of information in the meantime,’” Shizuku said in a joking tone.

“Indeed, not finishing Master off has dire consequences,” Tio replied.

“The more time you give Hajime-san, the less chance you have of ever beating him,” Shea added.

They hadn’t spent much time in the Sanctuary, and Hajime had already unveiled a few of his new weapons. If you included the

Gravity Meteors and Pulse Hyperions, he'd shown off quite a collection. Everyone thought of synergist as a commonplace job that wasn't suited for combat, but Hajime had proven them all wrong. Sure, what he'd accomplished was only possible thanks to his monstrous stats, which had nothing to do with his job, but Hajime's true weapon was his imagination, and his ability to turn his ideas into concrete tools. After all, humanity's greatest threat had always been, and always would be, the new things they themselves created.

In a way, Hajime possessed the most deadly talent of all: innovation. Though it seemed obvious in retrospect, Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou only now realized that was what made up the core of Hajime's strength.

"I used the minimum amount of firepower at my disposal and still trashed them all. I doubt Ehit is going to send any more apostles after us now, but...stay on guard just in case."

With that, Hajime started walking again. Shea and Tio followed behind, both of them in high spirits.

"Man, I wish Yue-san could have seen how cool Hajime-san was back there," Shea said with a smile.

"Fu fu, fear not. I thought we might want to show Master's exploits to Yue later, so I brought along a recording artifact. Once the battle's over, we can all watch the recording together."

"Nice thinking, Tio-san! I knew I could count on a pervert like you!"

"Bwa ha ha ha ha, praise me more! It makes me—Wait, that wasn't praise, was it?"

Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou exchanged glances, then smiled wryly at each other. Realizing that they wouldn't be able to keep up if they let themselves get overwhelmed by each and every shocking display, they shook off their hesitation and followed after Hajime.

When he reached the end of the corridor, Hajime touched the multicolored wall that seemed to be the end of this space. Ripples spread outward from the spot that he touched, and his hand slid into the colored wall. It looked like that spot did connect to somewhere else. And judging by his compass, their distance to Yue was the same on either side of the barrier.

Hajime doubted that wherever the other side spat them out would actually be spatially contiguous with where they were now, but it didn't seem to be any closer to Yue either.

"Well, for now..." Hajime mumbled as he took a palm-sized cylinder out of the holster at his waist and activated it with Lightning Field, then threw it through the multicolored wall.

Shizuku cocked her head and asked, "Hajime, what are you doing?"

"Just throwing a grenade over."

"What for?!"

"Uh, just hoping that if there are any enemies on the other side, the grenade will kill them."

Unfortunately, the compass wasn't able to give Hajime a clear picture of what was on the other side. In fact, it almost felt like wherever it was connected to was changing in real time, which was why he'd thrown a space-warping grenade over just in case. It was a new type of grenade that twisted the space around it into a whirlpool and crushed anything caught in it. It was extremely lethal while also being perfectly silent.

Worried about the destruction she might find on the other side, Suzu shouted, "What if Eri and Kouki-kun are through there?!"

Blinking in surprise, Hajime turned to her, then looked at Ryutarou and Shizuku as well. Upon seeing their expressions, he averted his gaze awkwardly.

“Look, it’s just common sense to suppress a new zone with a grenade before charging in...”

“That’s not an answer...” Ryutarou muttered, cradling his head. Shizuku looked up at the sky in exasperation.

Ignoring them, Hajime launched wires from his prosthetic arm, wrapped them around everyone, and said, “We might get teleported to different spots like what happened in Haltina and Schnee’s labyrinths. Let’s try to go in as close to the same time as possible.”

After saying that, he cast his gaze over everyone to make sure they were ready, and they nodded resolutely back at him.

With that, the group jumped through the rippling wall and into the unknown.

The transition between places was dizzying. A kaleidoscope of colors assailed the group from all sides, making them feel drunk. There was also a disgusting sensation of something slippery brushing against their skin. Fortunately, the whole experience lasted only a few seconds.

The party went from feeling like they were floating on clouds to stepping on solid ground, and the colors settled into sensible shades. However, the place they found themselves in was just as strange as the one they’d left.

“Wh-Where are we?” Ryutarou muttered, glancing around in confusion.

Hajime and the others scanned their surroundings with more composure, but on the inside, they felt just like Ryutarou.

“That is rather unique architecture... I’ve never seen such buildings in Tortus,” Tio mused.

"Whoa, these things are huge. They all look to be made of metal and stone, but..." Shea trailed off.

"H-Hey, Hajime, isn't this...?" Shizuku felt an extreme sense of déjà vu.

"No, this isn't Earth," Hajime replied bluntly.

The place they found themselves in certainly did resemble a modern Earth city. They were standing on the roof of one of the buildings, which was around thirty stories tall. It was made of something that looked a lot like concrete. The streets below appeared to be asphalt, and there were other skyscrapers in the distance. However—

"This is an abandoned city, isn't it? It looks like it was destroyed ages ago and brought here in its dilapidated state. I bet Ehit left it here as a memento of his conquests or something stupid like that."

As Hajime had said, the city was in ruins. Over half of the buildings the group could see had been destroyed. Some of them also leaned precariously, supported only by other buildings which were themselves leaning over. It looked like a strong breeze might send them tumbling like dominoes.

The asphalt streets were riddled with cracks, and in some places the ground bulged upward, whereas in others the asphalt had caved in. Rubble and broken glass littered the streets, and numerous objects that had likely been this world's vehicles were resting on their sides.

There was not a single person in sight. Loneliness and desolation were all that remained in this broken city. It truly did look like a ghost town that had been abandoned for millennia.

"Are you absolutely sure this isn't Earth, Nagumo-kun?" Suzu asked.

"Yeah, how can you know?" Ryutarou asked right after.

Ehit had claimed that invading Earth was his next goal. Indeed, Hajime and the others had all been summoned from Earth, so it

wasn't a stretch to think that Ehit might have summoned an entire city and laid waste to it for fun. Suzu and Ryutarou couldn't help but imagine the worst.

"These building materials aren't anything you'd find on Earth, and I don't recognize those letters as any language from back home."

Hajime could make out the letters on the faded billboards in the distance thanks to his Farsight skill. From what he could tell, the script wasn't any Earth language, and while it shared some similarities with the writing in Tortus, it wasn't quite that either. He had also analyzed the construction materials using his appraisal skills and had realized they were an amalgamation of enchanted ore that could be found in Tortus.

"Plus, there aren't any streetlights. I can't imagine any city on Earth not using those."

"Oh," Suzu said, wondering how she'd failed to notice something so basic.

I guess I still haven't fully calmed down... she thought to herself with a sad smile.

"Is your world like this, Hajime-san? He he, I can't wait to see it."

"Hmm... Long ago, there used to be civilizations that were this advanced on Tortus, but..."

Shea seemed happy to have caught a glimpse of what Hajime's world was like, while Tio frowned as she surveyed the ruins.

Hajime shrugged his shoulders, looked down at the compass once more, and said, "Back on Earth, there are relics of ancient civilizations that seemed to have technology that surpasses modern inventions. All of them were destroyed for unknown reasons, but...well, I bet it's obvious why this civilization ended."

Ehit had destroyed it in one of his games. He'd given the people knowledge to advance their civilization to modern levels, watched them prosper, and then crushed them at the height of their power. To Ehit, it had been no different than building a tower of cards before blowing it all down. He'd done it just for the fun of it, much like how he was trying to destroy Tortus for the fun of it.

"What a despicable creature," Tio muttered.

"Makes me wanna puke," Shea added, nodding in agreement.

Who knew how many civilizations Ehit had created and destroyed in this way. Who knew how many innocent people he'd trampled underfoot and erased from existence for his own amusement.

"We have to stop him..." Shizuku said, renewing her resolve. She felt a surge of sympathy for this lost civilization that so heavily resembled her own home. Though, at the same time, a shiver of fear ran down her spine. She realized that if they didn't stop Ehit, this was what would happen to every city on Earth.

"Oh, I'll stop him all right," Hajime said in a quiet but powerful voice. "While I'm getting Yue, I'll make sure to pay him back tenfold for what he did to me. That's part of my mission. I won't let anyone else have that satisfaction."

He put the compass back in his pocket and turned to Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou. The three of them were startled as they realized Shea and Tio had drawn their weapons.

Hajime's Treasure Trove glowed, and he said, "You guys just focus on your own mission."

Before Shizuku could even respond, Hajime had pulled out his rocket launcher, Agni Orkan. Unlike his old rocket launcher, this one was cross-shaped and weighed twice as much. The truly strange thing about its design, however, was the three sets of wings jutting out from it. They were thick and long, like those of a fighter jet.

Hajime then pulled out a second Agni Orkan, and the way he wielded both made it look like he was covered by a metal exoskeleton. It made him appear quite intimidating, especially since the two rocket launchers were pure black with crimson veins running down their length.

“Wait, are you gonna solo them again, Hajime-san?! There are two hundred of them, you know?!” Shea exclaimed.

“More importantly, Master, these are—”

“It’s fine. I don’t want a fight in the city.”

Hajime didn’t want to deal with the hassle of tracking stragglers down, so he’d decided to blow the newcomers away all at once. He pulled the trigger, and both Agni Orkans fired missiles out of their six launch tubes at the rate of an assault rifle. Thirty missiles shot out each second in an overwhelming display of firepower. Not only that, but a much larger missile shot out of the opening on the back of each of the rocket launchers, a trail of fire blazing in their wake. And to top it all off, the wings expanded and started firing countless micro-missiles as well. Each Agni Orkan was spewing out three hundred micro-missiles a second.

Ryutarou’s and Suzu’s jaws dropped open.

“Holy fucking shit!” Ryutarou exclaimed.

“I-I’ll set up a barrier just in case!” Suzu shouted.

Booming explosions echoed in the distance one after another. The sound was deafening, and the shockwaves reached all the way back to the party.

The rockets homed in on their targets and blew them up together with the buildings they were hiding in. And as the collapsing buildings caused the entire city to shake, the micro-missiles went farther out and pinpointed the targets in the distance. These missiles

were enchanted to seek out heat signatures, biosignatures, and even soul signatures to make sure they always hit their mark. They were similar to the Living Bullets Hajime had used earlier, but since these rockets and missiles were much slower, they could maneuver through tight spaces like windows and corners as well.

Though Hajime was only firing to either side, the missiles went in all directions, seeking out targets all around them. The series of explosions practically leveled the already ruined city. The few buildings that escaped being blown up were destroyed in the aftermath of the other buildings collapsing.

“Wait, time out! You’ll destroy the building we’re standing on too!” Shizuku shouted, covering her ears with both hands to protect them from the booms. In truth, the building they were standing on was shaking rather precariously.

“I was planning to destroy it anyway. There are some enemies inside.”

“What?!” Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou shouted in unison.

“Just use Aerodynamic to make some platforms to stand on,” Hajime replied casually.

“Wait!” the three of them shouted simultaneously once more.

Hajime fired one last missile from one of his Agni Orkans. It rose high into the air, then made a U-turn and headed straight back down to where Hajime and the others were standing. For a moment, Shizuku thought he must have made some kind of mistake, but then she realized that Hajime, of all people, would never have made such a stupid blunder. Realizing that moving would probably put them in danger, everyone did as Hajime had said and created platforms under their feet with Aerodynamic and remained in place. A second later, the missile plowed straight through the roof and continued heading straight down without exploding.

This was one of Hajime's specialty missiles, Bunker Buster. It pierced through its target, then exploded underneath them. It also created a localized gravity field to destroy anything underground. The Bunker Buster exploded only after hitting the ground floor, after which the building started to topple. That was a truly terrifying sight for Suzu and the others, who watched the building collapse directly underneath them. They had been on observation decks made of glass before, but in this instance, it was like watching the observation deck itself collapse around you.

"This reminds me of the time I saw footage of a bombing in the news. What's happening right now is exactly like that," Suzu muttered.

"Holy crap, he's a one-man army... By the way, Nagumo, I take it this means they were surrounding us?" Ryutarou asked.

"He blew up the entire city before we so much as saw a single soul, so it's hard to be sure, but that's probably what they were doing," Shizuku said, watching the dust slowly settle. Fires were still burning in the distance, and the historical ruins of this ancient Tortus civilization were now nothing more than rubble. She couldn't help but lament the fate of this ancient city.

Looking into the distance, Shizuku spotted a few buildings that were still crumbling. They were all buildings that surrounded a rather tall clock tower. Somehow, the clock tower itself was intact, but everything in its vicinity had collapsed. The destruction there had been caused by the larger missiles that had come out of the Agni Orkans' backs. Those two missiles had circled the area above the clock tower and rained a bunch of black crystals down that had created a number of black spheres to crush the buildings.

That was another one of Hajime's specialized missiles, Gravity Cluster. It was a specialized warhead that created its own gravity field while dispersing a litany of gravity bombs.

Why'd he target somewhere so far away? Shizuku thought, but she was then distracted when she saw a humanoid figure crawling out of the rubble.

"Whoa, someone survived that?!" Ryutarou shouted.

"That's...not an apostle. Is it a human-shaped monster?"

"It's hard to tell, since they're covered in dust."

The figure was missing some of its limbs and its skin was covered in heavy burns, yet it continued crawling toward the group, seemingly determined to fight. The sight was more ghastly than anything. What kind of creature was so eager to fight that it would abandon all of its preservation instincts? However, before Shizuku could even figure out what the enemy was, she heard an ominous click. She slowly turned around and saw that Hajime had just finished reloading his Agni Orkans.

"You're gonna finish it off?!"

"Look, you have to be thorough. The Kojiki says to destroy your enemies so thoroughly that not even scraps of them remain."

Shizuku wanted to shout, "No it doesn't!" but unfortunately, she knew her Japanese history well enough to know that it did actually mention massacring your enemies' entire families multiple times. Unable to argue, she could only watch as Hajime launched another round of missiles from his Agni Orkans.

A rain of death fell on the few creatures who'd been lucky—or rather, unlucky—enough to survive the initial barrage. They were obliterated in a wall of flame, leaving not even scraps behind.

Hajime cackled in satisfaction, but Shea muttered sadly, "There's nothing for us to do."

"Let Master have his fun for now. He's simply venting his frustration at having lost last time. We should watch over him until we're needed."

Hajime cackled maniacally as he watched the city burn. He really was more of a Demon Lord than the real Demon Lord. It was honestly no surprise that his classmates and the kings and queens of the various nations had given him that moniker. And really, the fact that Shea and Tio were encouraging his behavior didn't help.

Shizuku stuck her fingers in her ears to keep the explosions from deafening her and thought to herself, *Why did I fall in love with this guy again?* with a sigh. She was going through the same thought process Shea once had in the past.

Suddenly, a massive spiral of white light shot up from the clock tower in the center of the city. Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou recognized the hue of that mana immediately.

"K-Kouki?!" Ryutarou shouted. There was no mistaking that light. Only Kouki Amanogawa could produce mana that looked like that.

"He's here?! Does that mean Eri is too...? Wait, those things Hajime killed are her undead beastmen warriors, aren't they?!" Suzu shouted frantically.

They'd been pulverized so badly by Hajime's missiles that they'd been unrecognizable, but now it all made sense. The undead beastmen warriors were a creation of Eri Nakamura's. She had bound the souls of the dead to their owners' bodies, then modified those bodies by adding in monster DNA.

Upon realizing that her friend might be in the city, Suzu paled and exclaimed, "Nagumo-kun, stop! You promised you'd let us take care of Eri, remember?!"

Ryutarou paled as well, realizing that Kouki and Eri were right where Hajime had launched his gravity clusters. He rounded on Hajime, but

before he could start yelling at him, Hajime said, “That’s why I fired on them. They were trying to run. The whole reason I used those gravity clusters instead of missiles was to keep them trapped, not to kill them.”

That helped calm Suzu and Ryutarou down.

“So everything’s fine?”

“I said that at the start, didn’t I?”

Come to think of it, he did.

Tio had been about to say something, which Ryutarou now realized was probably about Kouki and Eri being here, but Hajime had said that it was fine.

“That tower is the next gate. I don’t know why they tried to fly away instead of just running through it, but either way, I’ve got them pinned down for now.”

Hajime fired off one last gravity cluster, then put his Agni Orkans away and pulled a spare Skyboard out. Shea and Tio followed suit, and Suzu and the others hurriedly pulled theirs out as well.

“I just helped you out a bit by thinning her army’s ranks. You don’t have a problem with that, do you?” Hajime asked as he grinned over his shoulder at Suzu and Ryutarou. The two of them smiled at him and shook their heads.

“If you only thinned them out, then does that mean she still has some undead soldiers left?” Shizuku asked as the group flew to the tower.

“This whole city is their base. They were patrolling the streets for enemies, and when we showed up, all the ones nearby came over to attack. But—”

“Some of them were waiting around the clock tower,” Shizuku said, finishing Hajime’s sentence for him. Right then, a blast of light shot out of the clock tower, taking down Hajime’s gravity cluster.

Hajime narrowed his eyes, and Shizuku and the others furrowed their brows in worry. Kouki’s strength was far greater than it had been at the Demon Lord’s castle. He’d clearly been strengthened in some way like Eri had.

Shizuku and the others shivered nervously, and a few seconds later, they got close enough to make out Kouki and Eri. Kouki had his Sacred Sword out and was wearing a suit of holy armor, while Eri had a single claymore and was dressed in an apostle’s battle uniform.

Kouki’s face softened as he looked at Shizuku and the others, but when his gaze shifted to Hajime, his expression turned furious. Eri clung to him, smirking condescendingly at the party, but she couldn’t completely hide her unease. Seeing as they’d tried to flee earlier, Eri clearly wanted to avoid fighting Hajime.

Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou hopped off their Skyboards, landing on a pile of rubble next to the clock tower.

“Shizuku, Ryutarou...” Kouki muttered.

“Heya, Kouki,” Ryutarou said in as casual a voice as he could muster.

“Kouki...” Shizuku whispered softly. Hajime and the others remained airborne, silently watching the showdown between childhood friends.

In a coquettish voice, Eri said, “Awwwww, why’d you guys have to come here?”

“Eri!” Suzu shouted. The two of them had finally been reunited out in the destroyed ruins of an ancient city in Ehit’s realm.

Kouki, Ryutarou, and Shizuku all opened their mouths to say something, but Eri beat them all to the punch and said, “You’re just

here to get your girlfriend back, right? Don't worry about us. We won't stop you. You better hurry though, or you'll be too late."

There was barely concealed panic in her voice. She was trying her best to appear composed, but she knew she didn't stand a chance against Hajime. Eri didn't even spare a glance at Suzu, Shizuku, or Ryutarou. Hell, she didn't even seem concerned by Shea and Tio's presence. She looked as desperate as she had back in Heiligh Castle, when she'd struggled as hard as she could to escape Hajime's wrath after betraying everyone.

The moment Hajime turned to her, she audibly gulped.

"You don't need to tell me that. I was going to leave anyway."

As Eri had suspected, Hajime thought absolutely nothing of her. Neither Eri nor Kouki had any value in Hajime's eyes, which was precisely why Eri couldn't understand why Hajime had gone out of his way to use a gravity field to trap them in place.

"Every single time you show up, you ruin everything," Eri spat, glaring at Suzu. It was only now that she realized who the greatest threat to her truly was. It was the girl standing before her who'd taken advantage of anything and everything possible to reach the Sanctuary. Even though Eri had trampled over her heart, even though she was the most cowardly girl Eri knew, she'd somehow been persistent enough to get Hajime, of all people, to help her out.

The look of pure hatred Eri shot at Suzu made it clear she didn't consider them friends. Indeed, Eri now regretted the fact that she hadn't killed Suzu when she had the chance. And yet, despite the look Eri was giving her, Suzu just grinned fearlessly.

"You finally looked my way," she said, making Eri even angrier as her lips twisted into a cruel frown.

"Is this really a bad thing, Eri?" Kouki said, sounding conflicted. "I never thought they would reach the Sanctuary, but if you think about

it, this saves us the trouble of searching for them... Prepare yourself, Nagumo. Your reign of terror ends here. Even if I have to dirty my hands, I'll kill you and make you atone for your sins!"

After saying that, Kouki looked up at Hajime, hatred, jealousy, and rage filling his eyes. He'd once again proclaimed himself as being on the side of justice, making Shea and Tio visibly cringe.

It was clear that Eri's brainwashing wasn't solely responsible for Kouki's transformation. The root cause was his unwillingness to accept a reality that differed from what he desired, which was the result of Kouki's own fragile heart.

"Hajime... Thanks for bringing us here. You can go now. We'll handle the rest," Shizuku said quietly, stepping forward and gripping the hilt of her black katana.

"You sure?" Hajime asked, raising an eyebrow. "Amanogawa's a whole lot stronger than before. He might be too much for you to handle."

"It doesn't matter," Ryutarou said confidently. "Bringing Kouki back to his senses is our job. You just focus on beating the shit out of that bastard Ehit."

"Yeah. Thanks for helping us get here. You too, Shea-san, Tio-san. Make sure you rescue Yue-onee-san, okay?" Suzu said, drawing her twin fans. Ryutarou then slammed his gauntlets together and the two of them stepped forward as well.

"Don't worry. We'll knock some sense into these two idiots and drag them back home. You've helped us out enough already with all the stuff you've given us," Shizuku said, keeping her gaze fixed on Kouki and Eri all the while. The way she carried herself spoke volumes about her resolve.

Hajime, Shea, and Tio smiled, nodding at her. The three of them had complete faith in Shizuku.

Kouki furiously ground his teeth together as he saw the trust between Shizuku and Hajime. Glaring daggers at him, he raised his sword to attack, but Eri stopped him with her Spirit Binding.

Hajime rose higher into the air with his Skyboard and said, "Well, enjoy your chat, guys."

"Don't die, okay!" Shea shouted.

"I believe in you three. We'll meet back up with you once this is all over!" Tio said.

After they'd given their respective words of encouragement, the three of them flew into the clock tower.

"Don't run away, you coward! Fight me, Nagumooooooooo!" Kouki shouted desperately. However, Hajime didn't even spare him a glance. He had zero interest in the so-called hero.

Kouki found it both humiliating and infuriating that Hajime considered himself so superior, yet no matter how badly he wanted to chase after him, he couldn't. Eri wouldn't let him. After all, she couldn't let Kouki ruin their only chance of being spared by Hajime.

Even though she was getting in his way, Kouki didn't seem mad at Eri in the slightest. In fact, he didn't even seem to care about finding out why exactly he couldn't move.

Shizuku narrowed her eyes at her childhood friend, her expression grim.

A few seconds after Hajime and the others disappeared from view, there was a brief flash, indicating that the group had gone through the portal.

"Goddammit! Don't ignore me, Nagumoooooooooooooooooooo!" Kouki screamed, his voice echoing futilely through the empty clock tower.

Chapter II: An Outstretched Hand

Even after Hajime had left, Kouki continued glaring up at the clock tower. Eri also cautiously gazed upward to make sure he didn't suddenly return.

"Wow...so that monster managed to get through. Interesting," Eri muttered to herself. After confirming that Hajime really was gone, she let out a sigh of relief, though a hint of frustration remained in her eyes.

For a moment, Shizuku was confused by her reaction, but then everything fell into place. But then, she mused, "Was the reason they didn't use the gate to escape because they *couldn't*?"

"Huh? Whaddaya mean, Shizuku?" Ryutarou asked.

"Ehit rejected them...or rather, he thought it'd be fun if we clashed, so he set this up."

"So he's pitting us against each other for his own amusement? What a scumbag."

Shizuku was relatively confident in her hypothesis, especially considering how Eri glared at her after she voiced it.

Sighing, Eri shook her head and pushed Ehit's games out of her mind for now. While she wasn't happy about it, right now she had bigger fish to fry. At least she didn't have to deal with the one enemy she knew she didn't stand a chance against—Hajime. Her condescending grin returned, and there was no fear behind it anymore.

"You guys are stupid. You should have thrown your pride aside and begged that monster for help. Without him, you don't stand a chance against us," Eri proclaimed, spreading her wings and making her gray-colored mana swirl around her in an attempt to intimidate Shizuku and the others.

However, Suzu wasn't fazed at all, and she casually replied, "You sure got talkative once he left, Eri. Don't worry. No matter what happens, we won't try to call him back here, so you can stop quaking in your boots."

"I see you've learned how to talk big," Eri said, her smile vanishing. She then examined Suzu like she was some strange new creature.

The Suzu that Eri knew was naive, simple, and easily manipulated. It was hard to imagine the person before her was the same one she knew. Suzu looked more determined than Eri had ever seen her before, and she appeared to have more depth to her as well. Eri didn't like this new Suzu at all. She couldn't explain why Suzu's determined, unwavering gaze bothered her so, but it did.

Bloodlust oozed from Eri's eyes, and in response, Suzu's eyes flared with fighting spirit. The two were staring at each other so intensely that it felt like sparks were flying from the force of their gazes. It was at that point that Kouki finally returned his attention to the ground.

"Won't you guys please surrender? I just want to rescue all of you," he said, sounding utterly sincere. Unfortunately, he was under such a huge misunderstanding that his "help" was no help at all.

Ryutarou scoffed and replied, "You've got it backward, man."

"I do?"

"We're here to save you."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't get it? 'Course you don't. Because right now, you're being a fuckin' idiot. You're too dumb to see what's in front of your goddamn face," Ryutarou declared as he took a resolute step forward, grinning like a feral wolf. Kouki was so overwhelmed that he swallowed his protests. "But that's why I'm here. I've gotta knock some sense into

you! You're my best friend, and that's why I'll beat the shit outta you! Grit your teeth, 'cause this is gonna hurt!"

Ryutarou's deep emerald-green mana swirled around him. There was a lot more of it than before, and it was clear to Kouki that Ryutarou had grown stronger as well. In fact, Ryutarou was now stronger than Kouki had been before his own strengthening. But more intimidating than his power was the sheer determination in his eyes. Kouki took an inadvertent step backward not because of how strong Ryutarou appeared to be, but because of the look in his eyes. Despite the bindings that Eri had placed on his soul, he still cast a longing glance toward Shizuku, the original reason why he'd fallen this far. Even though he was physically the strongest person present, he looked completely desperate and vulnerable. He'd hoped that even while brainwashed, Shizuku, at least, would've shown him some sympathy. As he had so many times before, he ignored the reality in front of him and prayed that things would line up conveniently for him.

However, Shizuku cut through his hopes immediately by saying, "I didn't come here with half-hearted resolve. Don't expect any mercy from me!"

Her voice boomed through the destroyed city, and as she drew her blade, Kouki's face paled. What horrified him the most was that Shizuku's words were directed to both him *and* Eri. Now, even Shizuku's scolding was no longer reserved solely for him. Kouki's heart sank, and he began slowly sinking into a deluge of despair. He had desperately hoped that Shizuku would look only at him and feel guilty about what she'd done to him, but none of that had happened.

"Don't worry, Kouki-kun. It's okay. I'll save you. Remember, I'm on your side," Eri said in a sweet voice. Her words reached Kouki even while he was wallowing in despair.

"Eri..."

"I'm the only one who'll never betray you. I'm the only one who'll always stand by you," she whispered seductively, tearing Kouki's attention away from Shizuku.

Kouki turned to find Eri's face inches from his own. "Yeah, thanks, Eri," he said as he flashed her a lopsided smile, his clouded eyes seeing nothing.

Eri smiled back at him, her face looking like a cracked pane of glass, and snapped her fingers. A deafening roar resounded, and then numerous figures burst from the nearby rubble, causing it to rain down all around them. The conversation thus far had just been a ploy to buy time. Gray-winged warriors surrounded Shizuku on every side except the one Hajime had obliterated. They were all knights of Heiligh that Shizuku recognized, but they'd been turned into grotesque facsimiles of themselves after Eri had mixed monster blood into their bodies and bound their souls. Shizuku had seen these undead soldiers once before, but they had a shocking new addition this time.

"Gray wings...? Don't tell me..." she muttered darkly.

"You know it!" replied Eri, clapping her hands. All of her soldiers had been demi-apostleified.

"I call them my Corpse Apostles. They might not be able to take a missile to the face, but simply burying them under rubble isn't enough to kill them!"

There were almost two hundred of them, and while they weren't as powerful as the original apostles, they were still among the most powerful beings in existence. Shizuku finally understood where Eri's arrogance was coming from, especially considering barely three days had passed since their showdown in the Demon Lord's castle. She probably assumed Shizuku and the others couldn't possibly have gotten *that* much stronger in such a short time.

“Did you really think I’d fight you guys fair and square? Hell no. I’m gonna crush you with numbers and—”

“Soul signatures analyzed, coordinates locked. Hallowed Ground - Immortal Prison.”

With a simple twirl of her fans, Suzu completely shattered Eri’s expectations. Geysers of orange mana burst forth from her, trailing the arc her fans had drawn and swallowing all of the Corpse Apostles whole. Hallowed Ground - Immortal Prison was an original barrier spell that Suzu had personally developed. Her fans were enchanted with spirit magic that let her trace the souls of her enemies, as well as spatial magic that allowed her to lock on to specific coordinates. As a result, she could pinpoint multiple enemies at once and trap them in a specially crafted barrier. While the abilities of her fans were impressive, what was even more impressive was her own ability to keep the coordinates of two hundred enemies firmly in her mind and seal them all. Both Eri’s and Kouki’s jaws dropped open. Meanwhile, Shizuku and Ryutarou pressed their advantage.

“Demonic Steel Fist - Giant Slayer!”

“Instant Transcendence - Flash Slice!”

Ryutarou and Shizuku dashed forward with such force that the rubble beneath them was pulverized. By the time Kouki regained his senses, Ryutarou’s fist was inches from his face. Kouki quickly raised his shield, but that wasn’t enough.

“Ngh!” he grunted through clenched teeth.

Ryutarou had practiced karate for years even before coming to this world, and Kouki had always known how deadly his friend’s fists could be. And yet, the force of the punch he’d taken just now was far greater than anything he’d anticipated. Demonic Steel Fist - Giant Slayer was a relatively simple move where Ryutarou concentrated all of his mana into his gauntlets—which were a special artifact Hajime

had made for him called Demonic Gauntlets—and used that to exponentially bolster the power of his punches. His gauntlets were enchanted with Diamond Skin, they could generate mana shockwaves on impact, and his job, monk, let him send those impacts through his opponent's defenses and strike their internal organs directly.

Ryutarou's punches were now strong enough to pulverize steel, and even with the ridiculous sturdiness that Kouki's stats granted him, it took all of his strength just to keep hold of his sword. He wasn't able to brace himself against the attack either, due to how bad his footing was, so he was sent flying. Eri wanted to run to Kouki's aid, but her instincts screamed at her to dodge, so she reflexively backed away instead. She hadn't heard any sound or seen even the glint of a blade, but there had indeed been a slash, so dodging had been the right move.

“Ngh!”

Looking down, Eri saw that her claymore had been sliced cleanly in half. Had she not leaped backward and used that sword to block, she would've suffered that fate instead...and her instincts had only been able to save her because she'd seen Shizuku's sword skills so many times while they were in the same party. Even a nanosecond's delay would have concluded this battle before it even truly began. Instant Transcendence was a form of evolution magic that Shizuku had developed. By activating evolution magic only instantaneously the very moment she struck, she kept her mana consumption low and also made it impossible to tell when she was about to use it. The new katana that Hajime had gifted her helped her control the instantaneous activation of evolution magic, as well as dampen the usual burst of mana that accompanied the use of any ancient magic.

Moreover, because the spell activated for only an instant, Shizuku could use it multiple times in the same attack. Here, she'd used it

once on her feet when charging forward, once on her arms when drawing her blade, and one last time on her sword itself to magnify its space-rending properties. As a result, her attack had been silent, invisible, and strong enough to slice through an Ehit-made claymore.

“Looks like your little surprise attack didn’t work,” Eri said, countering with a barrage of gray disintegration feathers all the while. Shizuku didn’t try to push in too far and instead backflipped away to where Suzu was and cut down the few feathers that reached her.

“I knew you’d be able to defend against it, though I had hoped to cut your arms off,” Shizuku said in a cold voice.

Eri summoned another claymore from thin air, a bead of sweat dripping down her forehead, then cooed, “Oooh, how scary. You want to torture me before killing me, then?”

Eri seemed to believe Shizuku and the others were here for revenge. Shizuku and Suzu both opened their mouths to argue, but before they could, Eri sneered and said, “But you know, I think you’re underestimating me here.”

Mana surged forth from the Corpse Apostles that Suzu had trapped. They had the same gray-colored mana that Eri did, but it was mixed with the dark-crimson mana that monsters had. The demi-apostleification process had unlocked the full potential of Eri’s creatures.

“Ngh, I figured they’d be able to use it too,” Suzu gasped as she struggled to keep her barrier from being eroded from the inside. She had suspected Eri’s Corpse Apostles could also use disintegration magic, but she’d been hoping they couldn’t. Judging by the fact that they hadn’t used it immediately upon being caged, it took the Corpse Apostles some time to charge it up, but the fact that they could use it at all was quite a problem. And to make matters worse—

“Dowaaaaah!” Ryutarou was sent flying back.

“Nimbus!” Suzu shouted, waving her fans. A net made of rings of light then appeared to catch Ryutarou and break his fall.

“Damn, that was a close call. Nice save, Suzu.”

Ryutarou rose to his feet as he thanked Suzu. Sweat beaded down his forehead, and there was a deep cut across his breastplate. His armor, like his weapon, was an artifact made by Hajime, and on top of being unbelievably sturdy, it was also enchanted with Diamond Skin. Ryutarou himself had activated Diamond Skin as well, but his triple defense had still been overwhelmed by a single attack.

“Do you understand now, Ryutarou? You can’t defeat me,” Kouki stated flatly, wind swirling around him as he alighted to the ground. “Shizuku, Suzu, just stop this. Surrender, and I won’t have to hurt you.”

Mana surged around him and his eyes glowed pure silver, which was proof that he’d activated Overload, Limit Break’s derivative skill. Shizuku and the others could tell instinctively that even with all of the buffs they had from their artifacts, Kouki’s stats were easily twice theirs, if not more. From the looks of it, all of Kouki’s stats were over ten thousand.

“Oh, by the way, neither I nor Kouki-kun will ever run out of mana,” Eri said with a grin. Just like true apostles, the two of them were being endlessly supplied with mana from Ehit.

“I-I don’t want to kill you guys!” Kouki shouted, prompting Ryutarou to flash him a confused look.

“Hey, what happened to freeing us from our brainwashing or whatever? You went straight for my neck there. That hurts, man, I thought we were friends.”

"If I can't convince you with words, I'll have to kill you, but don't worry..." Kouki mumbled, pointing his sword at Ryutarou with a sorrowful look on his face. He was really playing up the whole "tragic hero" angle. "Even if I do have to kill you, God will bring you back to life. And when you wake up again, the world will be back to the way it was before. No, it'll be an even more just world than ever!"

Kouki desperately pleaded for his friends to surrender so he wouldn't have to kill them, but Ryutarou simply rubbed his head as if to deal with an oncoming headache and replied, "What kinda bullshit did she stuff into your head?"

Half for Kouki's benefit, Suzu turned to Eri and said, "Hey, Eri, you plan on using your Spirit Binding to turn us all into undead after you kill us, don't you? That's the most convenient solution for you."

"Whaaat? How mean! I would never even dream of doing such a thing..." Eri replied innocently, her lips twitching up into a small grin, ruining the "good girl" act she was putting on. Though, of course, Kouki didn't notice. Naturally, since Eri wanted to be alone with Kouki, and Kouki wanted to rescue his friends, that was the most efficient way to technically achieve both goals.

"How could you say that, Suzu?" Kouki asked, looking disappointed in her. "Eri's your best friend...! No, wait, this must be the brainwashing at work. Please come back to your senses!"

"That's our line, Kouki," Shizuku said softly, looking Kouki square in the eyes. "Yeah, your soul's being controlled, but you must have realized the truth by now. Surely you can tell what Eri's really after, what Ehit means to do to everyone, and that you're just pushing all the blame onto Hajime because you don't want to accept reality."

Shizuku's cold tone made it clear that if Kouki continued to remain blind even after hearing all that, she would fight to the bitter end.

“Open your eyes. Quit daydreaming and face the truth,” Shizuku said, then took a deep breath and waited patiently for his reply. She wouldn’t avert her eyes, no matter what his ultimate decision was. She had already decided that she would never turn away from reality, no matter how harsh it became. As one final verbal slap to the face, she spoke to her fallen friend, saying, “Stop running away from us.”

Kouki staggered backward, looking as though he’d been struck by lightning. Eri clicked her tongue in annoyance.

“Poor Kouki-kun. Hajime Nagumo took everything from you! And even though Shizuku and the others have betrayed you, you’re still trying to save them!”

“Eri...”

“Unfortunately, it looks like the brainwashing runs so deep that we’ll have to kill them. But don’t worry, Kouki-kun. I’ll take care of everything. I’d never make you do something as cruel as killing your friends!”

After saying that, Eri leaned against Kouki and flashed Shizuku a devilish grin. She was playing up the “devoted heroine” act just as much as Kouki was playing the tragic hero. Shizuku and Suzu both grimaced, but the shoddy act seemed to work perfectly on Kouki.

“It’s all right, Eri. I won’t ask you to dirty your hands for my sake,” Kouki declared, turning to Eri with a reassuring smile.

“Doesn’t look like we’ll be able to solve this with words just yet,” Suzu said sadly.

“Yeah. Eri’s still messing with his head and using Spirit Binding on him. Until we get rid of that, he won’t listen to a word we say,” Ryutarou replied.

"That's fine. I knew from the very beginning that words alone wouldn't be enough," Shizuku stated resolutely. They had said their piece to Kouki already, so all that was left was to see who would persevere in this battle of wills.

Sighing in disappointment, Kouki cast a sad gaze at his former comrades and said, "So you won't listen to reason, then? Fine. I won't waver any longer. I... I—"

Kouki raised his sword over his head, and a swirling vortex of white and silver mana appeared at its tip. It looked like a mini-galaxy. The mana was so dense and powerful that it scorched the air around it.

"I'll kill you in order to save you!"

Pure-white wings spread out from the mass of mana. Next, a thick tail grew from the back, and four powerful limbs hit the rubble with a resounding thud, claws gouging the stone. Finally, a long neck extended from the front, ending in a ferocious head that rested ten meters above the ground. Two horns grew from the forehead, and vicious teeth lined the creature's jaws. It was a dragon. A huge dragon made of silver light. It stood behind Kouki, glaring down at Shizuku and the others.

"Divine Wrath of a Thousand Forms - Dragon Form. This dragon is the radiant light that shall destroy you," Kouki declared in a solemn voice. Divine Wrath was the strongest light spell, as well as the hero's main trump card. Normally, it was just a blast of light, but Kouki had found a way to morph its shape and keep it permanently active. It was Kouki's strongest spell, something he could only do thanks to his upgraded stats and his limitless supply of mana.

"Shizuku, Ryutarou, Suzu. We'll meet again when the world is fixed."

Upon hearing that, the three of them smiled fearlessly and refuted his words.

"Hmph. I'd like to see you try, you weakling!"

“Hah, in your dreams!”

“Our resolve is a lot stronger than you think!”

The dragon let out its first roar, making Shizuku and the others scrunch up their faces. They were expecting an immediate attack, but instead, they saw the dragon gather a sphere of light in its mouth.

“Shizushizu, Ryutarou-kun!” Suzy shouted. The two of them nodded in response, immediately picking up on her intentions without her needing to say anything more, and ran over. A second later, Suzy’s orange mana flared.

“Hallowed Ground - Scatter!”

A dome-shaped barrier appeared around the group, but unlike the usual Hallowed Ground, the mana comprising the barrier swirled around at high speeds. This was a special barrier that both absorbed and redirected the impact of attacks.

A moment later, the dragon unleashed its pure-silver breath, and an attack several times more powerful than Kouki’s Divine Wrath slammed down against the barrier. The part of the beam that was diverted obliterated the party’s surroundings, but the part that wasn’t was still powerful enough to crack Suzy’s barrier.

“Nnnnnnnngh!” Suzy groaned through gritted teeth.

Divine Wrath ended in seconds, so it wasn’t too hard to block, but this attack showed no signs of stopping. Suzy was already struggling to hold the beam at bay, but then Eri added her own attack to the mix.

“Pathetic, Suzy. Phantom Pain!” Eri exclaimed. Her voice carried surprisingly well through the deafening roar of the dragon’s breath.

Shortly thereafter, Suzy’s entire body was wracked with extreme pain. It was as though a thousand needles had been stabbed into

every pore of her skin. Suzu howled in pain, and her control over her barrier faltered. However, she maintained the portion of it that was blocking the breath above them, determined to at least make sure that one attack didn't make it through. By focusing her efforts on that single spot, she actually succeeded in strengthening her barrier.

Unfortunately for them, Eri had expected that would happen.

"Aha! You guys are wide open now. Die," Eri said, sounding awfully excited as she thrust out her hand and fired a disintegration beam at the group.

To make matters worse, Corpse Apostles flooded in from every direction but directly above them. They carried a variety of weapons from swords to spears to maces to daggers. From the looks of it, they were organized into a vanguard and a rearguard, and the rear guard had remained behind to cast magic. In seconds, disintegration beams rained down on them from all sides; not just from Eri. Eri was confident this concentrated barrage would eradicate Shizuku and the others, but then, Eri and Kouki heard the three of them talking. This time, it was *their* voices that carried surprisingly well through the din.

"Come, my sentient swords. Hundred Onyx Blades!"

"Come, my hunter of the abyss! Werewolf Prime!"

"Come, my loyal familiars! Abyssal Swarm!"

Suddenly, countless black objects shot out of the white light, heading straight for Kouki.

"What the—?!" he shouted, surprised by the unexpected counterattack. Due to that confusion, his reaction was delayed by a split second, so he wasn't able to use his Divine Wrath to defend himself.



Kouki reflexively tried to strike the black objects down with his sword, but he was only able to swat away a few before he was overwhelmed.

“Gah!”

Blood spurted from Kouki’s arms, and his sword flew out of his hands. Though it meant stopping his dragon’s assault, Kouki knew he had no choice but to leap away. He called his blade back with his mind and defensively coiled his dragon’s tail around him.

A second later, ten black katanas stabbed into the light dragon’s thick tail. They pierced fully through, but stopped just short of stabbing Kouki himself.

Cold sweat poured down Kouki’s forehead. Had he tried to use a regular barrier instead of his overpowered Divine Wrath, he would have been skewered. Shaking off the chill that ran down his spine, Kouki made his dragon whip its tail, dislodging the katanas. To his surprise, however, the katanas looked only lightly damaged despite being exposed to the full force of the dragon’s searing light. But what was even more surprising was—

“Th-They’re flying?”

The fact that the katanas were hovering in the air, surrounding him, stunned the hero. And of course, he knew there was only one person who could be their master.

Kouki turned toward where Shizuku was and asked in a shaky voice, “H-How did you...?”

In one place there was a black katana blocking a Corpse Apostle’s claymore. In another, a black katana sliced off another Corpse Apostle’s spearhead. And in yet another, a black katana stabbed right through a Corpse Apostle’s mace.

Dozens of black katanas circled around Shizuku and Suzu, completely halting the Corpse Apostles' assault. If you included the ten that had attacked Kouki, there were exactly one hundred of them.

Shizuku had somehow made a veritable barrier of blades.

"Cut them down - Instant Transcendence!"

The moment Shizuku gave her command, the barrier of blades turned into a whirlwind of death. Each blade executed one highly precise cut. They were so precise, in fact, that it was hard to believe that Shizuku was controlling all of these remotely.

This was the result of the new artifact Hajime had made for Shizuku, the Hundred Onyx Blades. They had been crafted with the same underlying blueprint as Hajime's Living Bullets. Gravity magic allowed them to fly through the air, and they possessed a small modicum of intelligence. Essentially, they were golems shaped like katanas. They had more autonomy packed into them than Hajime's bullets, and they were telepathically linked to Shizuku via her own metamorphosis magic, making them easy for her to coordinate. Most importantly though, Shizuku had spent what little time she'd had before the battle training them all in the Yaegashi sword style, so their skill was comparable to her own. They also were all enchanted with spatial severing magic, making them nigh impossible to block, which was why Kouki had been cut so easily.

An azure aura surrounded the blades as they whirled around at insane speeds. Unsurprisingly, the Corpse Apostles were unable to withstand the onslaught, and twenty of them were cut to bits along with their weapons and armor. Even those who'd managed to back away in time had lost some of their body parts or their weapons.

After the assault ended, the blades returned to their master, their points facing toward the floor. Standing in the center of the formation, Shizuku looked just like one of the heroes Kouki had

admired so much. Her ponytail fluttered in the wind and her cold, clear gaze was captivating.

“Beautiful...” Kouki muttered without realizing it.

He was so bewitched that he didn’t notice what was going on around him.

“Aoooooooooooooo!”

Upon hearing that roar, Kouki turned to see a black-furred creature with glowing red eyes, sharp claws, and pointed teeth. It was a werewolf, and it was currently attacking Eri. It had appeared at the same time Shizuku’s blades had, and it had cut a swathe of destruction through the Corpse Apostles on its way to Eri.

The werewolf moved so fast that even with her apostle-heightened senses, Eri only saw it as a blur.

But more deadly than its speed was the variety of karate techniques it was using. They all resembled Ryutarou’s techniques, and the werewolf’s assault was so vicious that Eri didn’t even get a chance to take to the skies. She was trying to wear it down with a barrage of disintegration feathers, but the werewolf’s leather breastplate and gauntlets deflected them all with ease. It had the same equipment Ryutarou had too, though it had grown when the wearer’s body had morphed, and its shape was slightly shifted to account for the change in physique.

At this point, it was clear to Eri that this *was* Ryutarou.

“Tch... You used metamorphosis magic on yourself? God, you really are a musclehead!”

“Can it! You fucked us all over, so now I’m gonna make you pay for it!”

Eri’s guess was right on the money. Ryutarou had used metamorphosis magic on himself to greatly increase his stats.

Transformation was a simple enough spell in theory. The caster ingested a mana crystal taken from a monster, which granted their body the properties of that monster. Until now, Ryutarou had focused on his close combat capabilities and neglected his magic training, so even though he had an affinity with metamorphosis magic, he'd had a hard time getting familiars to follow him. However, after a lot of thinking, he'd come to the conclusion that if he couldn't subjugate monsters to serve him, he'd just transform into those monsters instead.

But while that sounded simple, transformation was one of the hardest metamorphosis magic spells to master. Ryutarou had been lucky enough to have a natural affinity for body transformation though, and he'd powered through the training with brute force. Eri truly hadn't been far off the mark when she'd called him a musclehead.

For this transformation, Ryutarou was using the mana crystal from the werewolf king that lived on one of the lowest floors of the abyss. The transformation gave him the special magic of the monster he was using as a base, and in this case, the werewolf king possessed Foresight, Perception Enhancement, Flash Step, No Tempo, and Acceleration. This form was specialized for speed, which was why Ryutarou was able to overwhelm Eri.

Impatience welled up within Eri and she glanced at her Corpse Apostles to see why they hadn't fired off any disintegration barrages. When she saw what was going on, she shouted, "What the hell are you useless morons doing?! How can you let some bugs get the better of you?!"

Indeed, a swarm of insect monsters had attacked the Corpse Apostle rearguard just before they'd been able to finish casting. Giant centipedes spit out highly corrosive acid that ate through the Corpse Apostles' bodies.

The Corpse Apostles were obviously fighting back, and the centipedes weren't nearly strong enough to take a warhammer to the face, but they were still taking quite a few undead down with them. Plus, a swarm of giant hornets the size of babies was firing off a barrage of stingers that exploded upon contact, sowing even more discord among the Corpse Apostle squads.

A group of praying mantises waded into the confusion, firing off wind blades in all directions to wreak even more havoc among the Corpse Apostles. A number of the Corpse Apostles tried to take to the skies to flee to safety, but they got caught in the unbelievably strong webs spun by a group of spiders. However, if they remained on the ground, hordes of ants started overwhelming them. They all rushed out of a group of storage artifacts that Hajime had given Suzu, ones he'd dubbed Pokeyballs. While Shizuku and Ryutarou had kept Kouki and Eri busy, Suzu had thrown them out to every corner of the battlefield. The reason she'd even captured the Corpse Apostles with her barrier was to keep them from noticing the real threat.

Those monsters are way stronger than the ones we saw at the Demon Lord's castle! Eri thought, panicking slightly. But of course, the monsters Suzu was using now were far stronger than any that lived in the Haltina Woods. These were all monsters from the depths of the abyss, after all...and there were a good fifty of them.

Meanwhile, Suzu herself was protected by an airtight barrier. This was another one of her inventions, Hallowed Ground - Citadel. She'd cast twenty Hallowed Grounds at once, and any time one of the outer barriers was destroyed another would surge forward to take its place.

Protected as she was by such a powerful barrier, Eri and Kouki couldn't hope to stop the monsters' assault by taking her out. Moreover, since she was protecting herself, none of her comrades needed to stay back and guard her. As soon as she finished deploying

her defenses, Shizuku turned all one hundred of her katanas on Kouki.

“Numbers twenty to fifty, kill Shizuku! Sixty to eighty, support me! The rest of you should attack Suzu! Rearguard, don’t bother trying to charge your disintegration magic, just rush them down!” Eri barked out orders in a shrill voice, her mask of confidence slipping. She could feel the tide shifting away from her. It was as if everyone and everything in the world was rejecting her, which was an all-too-familiar feeling for her.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Ryutarou roared as he charged at Eri.

“Quit barking, you mutt. Crazed Moon - Full Power!”

Eri unleashed a wave of disintegration magic all around her, causing Ryutarou to stumble momentarily, then used her ultimate dark magic spell to make Ryutarou lose consciousness for a few seconds.

A flickering black moon the size of a tennis ball appeared between Eri and Ryutarou. This was a spell that had worked on even Yue before. The moment Ryutarou gazed into the Crazed Moon, Eri grinned, confident of her victory.

“Thunderclap Blows!” Ryutarou shouted, not even slowing down.

“Wha—?! Gah!”

His fist sank deep into Eri’s solar plexus, sending her flying back into the mountain of rubble. She quickly bounced back to her feet but was left grimacing in pain.

Ryutarou’s Demonic Fists were enchanted with Lightning Field, as well as his own innate ability to make his blows penetrate armor. Thanks to that, he’d sent the spell’s powerful shocks through Eri’s entire body.

Eri couldn’t fathom why her Crazed Moon, which had brought even Yue low, had somehow failed to work on Ryutarou.

"You already used that trick against Nagumo!"

But of course, the fact of the matter was that Hajime had developed countermeasures for it precisely because it had worked in the past.

Are you fucking kidding me?! Eri screamed internally. She hadn't forgotten how monstrously adaptable Hajime Nagumo was, but she hadn't thought he could counter a spell after just seeing it once.

Wait, calm down. We've still got the advantage here!

Ryutarou launched himself at Eri again, sparks flying off his gauntlets. But she just sneered at him, and a second later, her Corpse Apostles came to her aid. One of them stomped their foot on the ground, and an instant later, the ground under Ryutarou's feet exploded. Shards of stone bombarded his legs, stopping him momentarily. Then, a second Corpse Apostle appeared. He suffused his tower shield with dark-crimson mana and launched himself at Ryutarou. The mana-enhanced shield bash sent Ryutarou flying, giving Eri some much-needed time to think and heal herself.

Whatever artifact Nagumo gave them was probably meant to actually be a countermeasure to Divine Edict. If it protects their souls from being affected in any way, it probably also has the side effect of defending them from mental attacks. And yet, my Phantom Pain worked on Suzu. Probably because it's magic that directly affects the senses. In other words, my magic is still effective so long as I limit it to hitting their senses.

Ryutarou quickly got back to his feet, but the Corpse Apostles were on him in seconds. With stunning coordination, they surrounded him and charged at him, their weapons wreathed in their respective special magics.

As Ryutarou desperately dodged a burning red spear, a claymore clad in lightning, and a longsword emitting petrifying smoke, Eri cast her cold gaze on him.

“Oblivion.”

Oblivion was a simple dark spell that covered the target’s vision with a black haze.

“What the hell?!” Ryutarou shouted. He then rushed toward where he’d last seen his opponents in the hope of closing the distance and keeping them from using their longer-reaching weapons, but it was difficult when he couldn’t see.

The spear-wielding Corpse Apostle easily sidestepped him and thrust at Ryutarou’s unguarded flank. And upon seeing that, Eri smirked, certain that Ryutarou was finished.

“Hallowed Ground!” Suzu exclaimed, summoning a group of shimmering hexagonal shields to protect Ryutarou. They didn’t slide into place from somewhere else either; they simply appeared at the exact spot needed to block the attacks.

The spear slid off the angled shield, while another two shields took the other Corpse Apostle’s swords head-on. That wasn’t the end of Suzu’s tricks, however.

“Burst!”

With a single word incantation, the shields exploded outward, blowing the Corpse Apostles away. Then, without missing a beat, Suzu shouted, “Etheria!”

Etheria was a light magic spell that cured all negative status effects.

“Thanks, Suzu!” Ryutarou shouted as he regained his vision. He turned to Suzu and gave her an appreciative nod. As someone who’d fought by her side for quite some time, he knew barrier magic wasn’t Suzu’s only specialty.

In the same way that Kaori had mastered barrier and support magic after a great deal of effort despite having the job of priest, Suzu had

also trained hard in healing magic. And she'd done it all to get the chance to talk to Eri again.

Suzu swung her fans over and over from within her magical citadel, protecting and healing her familiars, who were outnumbered by the Corpse Apostles two to one. On top of that, she seized every opportunity she could to cast Immortal Prison and temporarily cage every Corpse Apostle in sight. If they took too long to escape, she could add fire or lightning magic to her imprisoning barriers and kill the Corpse Apostles outright.

Unfazed by the Corpse Apostles' insane toughness or their plethora of special magics, Suzu soldiered on. While she hadn't succeeded in defeating too many on her own, her exceptional abilities as both a commander of familiars and a rearguard support allowed her to take on two-thirds of the Corpse Apostles so her comrades could focus on Kouki and Eri.

After a few seconds, Suzu locked eyes with Eri, and Eri's confident sneer slipped a little. Contrary to her expectations, Suzu was protecting her comrades instead of cowering in fear. In fact, her steadfast resolve seemed the strongest out of everyone's.

"Don't act so cocky, Suzuuuuuu!" Eri roared, clearly incensed.

Suzu just smiled back. At long last, Eri was unable to ignore her like she had before. Suzu was no longer beneath Eri's consideration. Eri's anger proved that beyond a doubt. She'd been properly recognized as a foe.

"I'll smash those pathetic barriers of yours!" Eri exclaimed, taking Suzu's genuine smile of happiness as a provocation as she flew high into the sky.

Eri and her Corpse Apostles were masters of aerial combat. Even if, in werewolf form, Ryutarou could keep up with them on the ground, he didn't stand a chance in the air. Up there, they could unleash a

barrage of disintegration magic without interruption... Or so Eri thought, but after she'd risen into the air, she felt blinding pain in her head.

"Gaaah!"

The pain was so intense that she blacked out for a brief instant.

What happened? Did a monster get above me without me noticing?

Looking up, Eri saw nothing at first, but when she squinted a bit harder, she realized what she'd been hit by.

"A barrier?!"

A tiny, transparent barrier the size of a quarter was what had hit her on the head. This too was another one of Suzu's original spells, Barrier Maze. By setting up tiny, transparent barriers all around her enemies, Suzu could limit their range of movement. The truly dangerous thing about this spell was that the faster her enemies were, the more they damaged themselves on collision.

In her haste, Eri had flown headfirst into one of the barriers.

"Ha ha, what idiots!" Ryutarou shouted, laughing heartily as he watched the Corpse Apostles that had surrounded him run into similar barriers and fall back to the ground. He then quickly set about slaughtering all of them before they could regain their bearings.

It was clear that his focus was on them, but the timing of his outburst was so perfect that Eri felt as though it had been directed at her. Her grin vanished completely and she snarled, "Fine, let's see if you can block this!"

Then, she wrapped her gray wings around herself like a cocoon, suffusing them with disintegration magic to protect herself from any attacks that might come her way. After a few seconds, she shouted, "Phantom Pain, Insanity Howl, Oblivion, Decimate!"

Eri had cast a series of dark magic spells in quick succession. Phantom Pain, which distorted the target's sense of touch and caused them to suffer extreme agony rushed toward Shizuku. Insanity Howl, which caused auditory hallucinations and interfered with the target's sense of hearing hounded Ryutarou. Oblivion, which blinded the target, and Decimate, which dispersed the mana of the spells the target was casting, struck out toward Suzu.

Shizuku grunted slightly, while Ryutarou, whose hearing had been heightened considerably due to his transformation, howled in pain and covered his ears.

Blinded, but acutely aware that her barriers were beginning to crumble, Suzu twirled gracefully, her fans dancing through the air.

"All targets locked... Etheria! Gather around me once more, Hallowed Ground - Citadel."

Suzu healed herself and her two comrades instantly while simultaneously redeploying her fortress. Then, she once again locked eyes with Eri and replied, "Looks like I can, Eri."

At long last, Suzu was able to stand on equal ground with Eri, without having to rely on anyone else.

There was a brief moment of silence, then Eri covered the battlefield in destructive gray light, which Suzu met with her protective orange light.

The two surges of mana clashed around Shizuku, with Eri seeking to destroy her and Suzu seeking to protect her.

I guess this counts as a conversation of sorts... Shizuku thought to herself with a small smile. Like Ryutarou, she had absolute faith that Suzu would be able to protect her from anything Eri might try. Plus, even if she hadn't, she had her hands full with Kouki already, so she couldn't exactly do anything about Eri.

“Instant Transcendence!”

Kouki’s dragon of light fired its breath at Shizuku, and she used Instant Transcendence in combination with Flash Step to dodge in the nick of time. She then landed a good ten meters away, pivoted on her right leg, and shouted, “Roar—Lightning Blade!”

Drawing her katana with lightning speed, she sliced at the two Corpse Apostles that had been closing in on her from behind. They managed to stop themselves just in time to avoid getting cut in half, but Shizuku had predicted they would. After all, the real power of Lightning Blade was the paralyzing shockwave it unleashed, not the force of the blow itself.

“Flash Slice!”

Indeed, the shockwave caused the two Corpse Apostles to stiffen for a second, and two of Shizuku’s blades flew in from behind to split them from head to toe.

That’s five!

Thirty Corpse Apostles had come to Kouki’s aid, and Shizuku had already slain five of them.

Shizuku had grouped her hundred blades into ten groups of ten. The first group was focused on protecting her, while the remaining nine split up into even smaller groups of three, with each subgroup handling a Corpse Apostle.

Unfortunately, it’s getting harder to kill them with just my Hundred Onyx Blades.

Unlike true Apostles, the Corpse Apostles weren’t merely puppets. Though they were bound to serve Eri as her loyal slaves, they still retained much of the skills and tactical knowledge that they’d had when they were alive. And as a result, they could adapt to Shizuku’s techniques.

Luckily, now that she had downed five Corpse Apostles, her third group had some leeway to further impact the battle. At the same time though, five of her blades had been brought down by the Corpse Apostles' disintegration attacks—which they'd sacrificed their own comrades to buy enough time to charge up—and their oscillation-related special magics. Still, Shizuku was the one dealing proportionally more damage.

“Divine Wrath - Ten Celestial Flashes!” Kouki roared as he unleashed a series of shockwaves to trap Shizuku in place while his dragon rained a beam of light down on her.

At a distance, the sparkling display of pure-white light looked rather beautiful. But to Shizuku, it was the light of annihilation. If any of those attacks hit her, she’d be reduced to ash, which was precisely why she advanced rather than choosing to dodge. She placed her faith in the artifact her beloved had given her and marched boldly forward into that rain of death.

“Blades one and three, attract. Blades seven through nine, repel.”

Two of Shizuku’s katanas moved diagonally in front of her. The gravity magic imbued in her blades allowed them to draw things toward them, so Kouki’s shockwaves of light changed course as they entered the katanas’ gravity fields. Meanwhile, three other katanas soared over Shizuku’s head and, like an umbrella, repelled the dragon’s breath to fall all around Shizuku instead of on her.

Using a combination of Flash Step and No Tempo, Shizuku closed the distance between herself and Kouki in an instant.

“I’ve already analyzed all of your movements, Shizuku,” Kouki proclaimed, swinging his sword down at her. His arm had already been healed. The apostleification process had increased his natural healing rate exponentially, and there was a Corpse Apostle with

powerful healing special magic at his side as well. Even cuts deep enough to sever his muscles healed in seconds.

As Kouki swung his sword, his dragon also tried to stomp down on Shizuku with its foreleg. Each of its claws was a Celestial Flash unto itself, but with how densely packed the mana in them was, Shizuku would have been crushed far before she was cut apart.

Kouki seemed to think he could just bring his friends back after killing them, but Shizuku idly wondered if that would still be possible if they were annihilated on the molecular level.

I bet he hasn't even considered that. After all, he just ignores any truth that might inconvenience him. Sorry, Kouki, but I'm the one who's analyzed you.

“Group Three, defend me! Shock Impact!”

Shizuku’s katanas formed a round shield above her, and their azure auras pulsed with power. The katanas were enchanted with the ability to convert mana into shockwaves, which allowed them to withstand high-density attacks.

Of course, they could only last an instant against the massed might of Kouki’s mana, but an instant was all she needed.

“Limiter Removal!” Shizuku exclaimed, using evolution magic to boost her strength even further and surge forward while her katanas were crushed behind her. She then weaved her way through Kouki’s barrage of attacks and reached him so quickly that it looked like she’d teleported.

“Flash Lightning!”

Shizuku drew her blade with blistering speed, bolstering her iai slice with lightning magic to unleash a slash powerful enough to split even Kouki’s holy armor.

But of course, Kouki reacted in time to avoid being bisected. A loud metallic clang resounded and sparks flew as he blocked Shizuku's attack with his holy sword. The lightning that arced out from her blade was absorbed by his armor as well, leaving him completely unaffected.

However, Shizuku had been expecting that. She already knew how heavily Kouki's stats dwarfed hers. And so, she tilted her katana and slid it up the length of Kouki's blade to slice at his head.

"Ngh!" Kouki grunted. He jerked back his head just in time, but Shizuku's katana still grazed his cheek.

However, Shizuku followed up by going for Kouki's knee with her sheath.

"Force Impact!"

Kouki just barely lowered his sword in time to prevent his kneecap from being shattered. Unfortunately, the force of the blow caused his sword arm to stiffen for a moment, and Shizuku did a returning downward slash with her katana. But just before her blade hit Kouki's shoulder, her instincts screamed at her to run, so she forced herself to leap backward. Her legs groaned in pain at the exertion, but it was worth it, since a beam of light blasted right through where she'd been a second ago.

Kouki's dragon had lowered its head to the ground and fired a horizontal blast of breath at her. It had kept the attack small so as to not accidentally hit Kouki as well, but by focusing its breath, it had made it even more deadly. The beam hit a building a few kilometers away, passed right through it, and then passed through another dozen buildings behind it.

"You're strong, Shizuku. You almost had me there."

"You've just grown weaker. You're a disgrace to the Yaegashi Sword Style."

Shizuku and Kouki locked eyes. Kouki's gaze was almost tender, while Shizuku's was ice-cold. He should have been able to respond to Shizuku's attack using his own Yaegashi Sword Style techniques. Like her, he could have used his sheath as another blade. But instead of relying on the skills he'd built up himself, he'd clung to the power Ehit had given him and used his superior stats to weather Shizuku's assault.

Sadly, Shizuku's scolding fell on deaf ears. Rubbing the cut on his cheek, Kouki narrowed his eyes at Shizuku and said, "Poor thing. You've been brainwashed so badly that you can't even tell how huge the gap in strength between us is."

He clearly had absolute faith in his light dragon. The limitless supply of mana and increased strength he'd received had made him overconfident. He didn't even register the fact that Shizuku's swordplay was far superior to his own.

"But it'll all be okay soon enough. I won't let Nagumo hurt you anymore. After I revive you and remove the brainwashing, I'll protect you from him."

Kouki's words were so empty, so devoid of emotion, that they were hard to bear. Shizuku let out a disappointed sigh. She hated seeing her childhood friend like this. Even knowing her words wouldn't reach him, she couldn't help but try to convey her feelings to him.

"Protect me, huh? You said that before too, but honestly, I don't think you've ever actually protected me even once."

"I see... So Nagumo's messed with even your memories, eh? Well, you might not remember, but I've always been there by your side, protecting you. Though I guess my words can't reach you right now."

"That's my line!" Shizuku exclaimed. She could tell Kouki had genuinely thought that even before Eri's brainwashing, which pissed her off more than anything.

Kouki raised his sword high and stated, “I’ve finally gotten used to this power.”

A moment later, his dragon’s light grew even stronger. Like Eri, he hadn’t had much time to get used to his newfound power.

Fortunately for him, he had an innate knack for battle, so he’d finally figured out how to optimally use his power to strengthen his dragon.

Of course, Shizuku wasn’t just going to sit there and let him power up. She gathered the ten swords of her first group around her and prepared to charge at him once more. But before she could, she felt a chill run down her spine.

“Ngh!”

Diving forward on instinct, she rolled just in time to hear something whoosh over her head. Turning around, she saw one of her katanas pointed at her. She tried to turn away before it could stab her through the head, but fortunately, a barrier appeared to protect her.

Looking around, Shizuku saw a number of her other swords being similarly blocked by barriers. But while she was safe for the moment, she couldn’t afford to relax. There was no reason her blades would be attacking her, so the situation at hand made zero sense to her. But then, she saw the veneer of gray mana covering the blades as they quivered, and everything fell into place. A second later, a wave of orange mana came to cleanse her swords.

“Sorry, Shizushizu! I wasn’t able to stop her in time!” Suzu said via telepathy.

“Well, you saved my life, so I’d say you still made it in time,” Shizuku replied, similarly via telepathy.

Since Shizuku’s katanas were biological golems, they were susceptible to status effects like any other living organism. Of course, Hajime had made sure to protect them from Divine Edict and other spirit magic, but they still relied on their visual and auditory senses.

He could have made them rely solely on soul sight, but then they wouldn't be able to sense creatures that had no souls, like the apostles. And so, while they had no eyes or ears in the traditional sense, they were imbued with magic that granted them all five human senses.

Eri had been clever enough to figure that out and take advantage of that weakness. And unfortunately, Suzu hadn't been expecting an attack like that.

Of course, Eri's dark magic worked just as well on Suzu's familiars as well, so she was struggling to keep up with protecting them all. There was a huge gap in skill between Suzu, who had simply picked up healing magic as a side skill, and Eri, who was a master of dark magic and possessed the strongest dark magic job of all, necromancer.

Furthermore, Eri had a limitless supply of mana, whereas Suzu had to rely on mana-restoring artifacts, which caused there to be a slight delay every time she ran low. This was why she'd had to use a barrier to protect Shizuku before she could switch to healing magic to fix her swords.

Whatever the case though, Shizuku had lost her chance to stop Kouki's power boost.

"Divine Wrath of a Thousand Forms - Advent of the Dragon Horde."

A bunch of smaller dragons split off from the giant light dragon. But even the smaller ones were easily a meter in length. And like their origin, they too were composed of the spell Divine Wrath. What's more, there were fifty of them in total.

"The problem with my initial dragon was that it wasn't very good at making tight maneuvers," Kouki said, pointing his sword at Shizuku. "This is the end, Shizuku. Even you can't deal with this many attacks at once. This will hurt at first, but don't worry, I'll nurse you back to health in no time."

The army of small dragons rose into the sky. They then opened their jaws simultaneously and began gathering light. From the looks of it, they were targeting the entire battlefield. Shizuku, Ryutarou, and even Suzu were in their line of fire.

“Shizushizu! Ryutarou-kun! We’re switching it up!” Suzu shouted, prompting Shizuku to spin on her heel.

“Sorry, but there’s only one guy I want nursing me back to health...and it isn’t you,” Shizuku replied curtly before she started running. She then recalled all of her blades and used No Tempo and a series of Flash Steps to zigzag her way between the torrent of light raining down on the battlefield.

Ryutarou threw the Corpse Apostle he’d just killed at another Corpse Apostle, then similarly disengaged from the battlefield.

“Aha, you sure you want to let my Corpse Apostles run free?”

Now that they no longer had to defend Eri and Kouki, the Corpse Apostles were free to chase Shizuku and Ryutarou. Sure, a few of them were shot down by Kouki’s indiscriminate barrage, but they didn’t seem to mind in the slightest. If anything, it spurred them on even more, and they did their best to try to take Shizuku and Ryutarou down with them. And obviously, Eri had fired off her disintegration feathers, and Kouki had unleashed Celestial Flash after Celestial Flash at the retreating duo as well.

It was an overwhelming onslaught. But because Eri and Kouki were focusing solely on Shizuku and Ryutarou, Suzu no longer had to heal status effects or protect her familiars.

“Dance—Hallowed Ground - Cherry Blossoms!”

Fluttering cherry blossoms appeared in the air as Suzu danced. But while they looked pretty, they were far more dangerous than actual cherry blossoms.

The petals whirled around Shizuku and Ryutarou, creating a tornado of orange light around the two of them. The barrage of attacks hit the tornado and smoothly slid right off it. Also, any Corpse Apostle that rushed into the tornado came out on the other side as a true corpse. Their bodies were sliced to bits, and in places gouged deeply. Some of them were simply missing their heads.

This was another one of Suzu's original spells, Hallowed Ground - Cherry Blossoms. As the name implied, she'd taken the powerful barriers from Hallowed Ground and shrunk them down to the size of cherry blossom petals. Those tiny barrier fragments could slice through anything that passed through them while also deflecting attacks by clumping together. With every wave of Suzu's fans, the storm of cherry blossom petals undulated and turned from a tornado, to a stream, to a wall, and back again. The spell's only real flaw was that it took time to cast. But once it was out, she could use Hallowed Ground Reversal to keep the spell running for as long as she had mana.

While she protected her friends, Suzu swung down the fan in her other hand at Eri and asked calmly, "Are you sure you should be getting so cocky?"

At that point, Eri noticed something fluttering at the edge of her vision. Turning around, she blinked in surprise when she realized what she was looking at.

"What are these? Butterflies?"

"You spent so long hiding behind your wings that you didn't even notice."

The black butterflies fluttering above Eri had crimson magic circles engraved onto their wings. There were so many of them that they blotted out the sun, yet more and more of them kept pouring out of

the jewels set into the base of Suzu's fans, spreading out to cover the entire battlefield.

Suzu looked like a shrine maiden doing a sacred Shinto dance. Every single time she swung her fans, more black butterflies and orange cherry blossoms appeared in the sky. It was a bewitching sight. So bewitching, in fact, that even Eri found herself entranced.

"You know, I recently learned the perfect phrase for this situation," Suzu said in a cheerful voice, snapping Eri out of her reverie. Beating her wings furiously, she silently seethed at the fact that she'd been entranced by Suzu, even if only for a second.

Eri glared daggers at Suzu, but Suzu just smiled fearlessly and said, "I've given myself infinite turns."

"You little..."

Suzu couldn't remember if it had been Hajime or Kaori who'd taught her that phrase. Both of them were avid gamers, so it could have been either of them. Regardless, Suzu's taunt angered Eri so much that she didn't realize what was really happening until it was far too late.

"Ngh, my body's—"

"Kouki-kun?! Is that...poison?! This must be the work of some kind of special magic!"

Looking back up, Eri realized the butterflies were dispersing their scales over the battlefield. Of course, by the time she figured out it was some kind of special magic, it was already too late. Kouki and all of the Corpse Apostles had been paralyzed.



Moments later, Shizuku and Ryutarou leaped out of the storm of cherry petals, Shizuku charging at Eri and Ryutarou heading for Kouki.

Kouki didn't even have time to curse his own carelessness. He reflexively manipulated his dragon and protected himself with its tail, while having it counterattack with its claws. Sure, Ryutarou was unbelievably fast in his werewolf form, but he wasn't particularly sturdy or strong. Kouki was confident his dragon would be able to fend him off. But to his surprise, Ryutarou didn't even bother trying to dodge the claws heading straight his way. Instead, Ryutarou simply transformed into a different monster, one better suited to defense and clashes of pure strength.

“Come, my steel demon—Transformation - Ogre!”

Emerald-green mana swirled all around Ryutarou, and his muscles bulged to twice their usual size. His skin took on a greenish tint, his height grew to over two meters, and his canines turned into pointed fangs.

Ryutarou parried the dragon's claws with his left hand, then redirected them with a fluid flick of his wrist. The sheer amount of energy condensed in the dragon's claws singed his left side a little, but that was all.

“What?! Ryutarou, how did—?” Kouki stammered.

“Damn, that stings! But hey, I blocked it! And now it's my turn!” Ryutarou roared, pulled his right arm back, and stepped forward with enough force to crack the ground under him.

Kouki was still protected by his dragon's tail, but Ryutarou seemed determined to punch right through it. The ogre boasted one of the highest durability and power levels of any monster in the abyss, and its special magic was Impact Manipulator.

Ryutarou's fist slammed into the dragon's tail with an explosive boom, quite literally disintegrating it. The force of the impact passed right through it and sent Kouki flying as well. In fact, he didn't even have time to scream before he slammed into the building behind him, passed right through it, and then through a few more buildings after that.

"Kouki-kun—" Eri exclaimed, launching a barrage of disintegration feathers at Shizuku to try to get past her and save Kouki.

"Sorry, Eri, but I'm just the bait," Shizuku said, calmly dodging out of the way.

"Inaba-san, you're up!" Suzu shouted.

"Squeak, squeak!" a shrill noise rang out, answering Suzu's call.

Eri turned and saw a fluffy white creature with crimson eyes and crimson streaks running down its fur heading straight for her. The prominent ears on its head made it clear what kind of animal it was. This was the strongest of Suzu's familiars, the Kick Rabbit, Inaba. Though it was a monster from the shallowest floor of the abyss, it had spent a long time feeding on the Ambrosia that Hajime had spilled and eventually gained sentience. After that, it had trained as hard as it could to chase after its role model, Hajime, and made it all the way to the bottom of the abyss. On top of that, Hajime had armed it with powerful strength-enhancing greaves, ear cuffs that further raised its intelligence, and a sturdy vest made of metal threads. With such powerful artifacts at its disposal, Inaba was as fast as Shizuku under the influence of evolution magic.

Eri was barely able to make out its afterimages as it charged toward her. A second later, there was a rabbit foot right in front of her face. Like Kouki, she didn't even have time to scream as Inaba's kick sent her flying into the building opposite the one Kouki had slammed into. She, too, passed right through it and then through a few more.

The Corpse Apostles had managed to neutralize their paralysis with disintegration magic, but suddenly found themselves too stunned to move instead. Moreover, they weren't sure whether they should go after Eri to protect her or try to stop Shizuku. Without orders, they had a hard time making decisions.

Meanwhile, Shizuku and Ryutarou returned to Suzu's side.

"Here you go, Shizushizu, Ryutarou-kun," Suzu said, taking portable ration blocks that looked like poisoned CalorieMate out of her Treasure Trove and tossing them to Shizuku and Ryutarou.

"Thanks. I'm already starting to get the shakes. I doubt I'd survive without these guys."

"You sound like a drug addict."

Ryutarou ignored Suzu's comment and plopped the whole thing into his mouth. A second later, he stopped trembling and the exhaustion left his voice.

"In all fairness, these things do look like some kinda drug," Shizuku replied, swallowing her own block.

This, too, was one of Hajime's artifacts. The food-type artifact, CheatMate. He'd made it by enchanting minerals that the human body needed, like iron, with metamorphosis and evolution magic, then combining the powdered minerals into a solid block. These blocks both raised a person's base stats and increased their entire body's sturdiness.

The party was also all wearing necklaces enchanted with evolution magic, which, combined with the blocks, doubled their stats. It wasn't as good as actual evolution magic, but it was still quite the boon. Shizuku and Suzu could only multicast all these spells at once thanks to those artifacts, and similarly, Ryutarou was only able to withstand the effects of his Transformation because of them.

Unfortunately, the CheatMate's effects didn't last very long. They'd each taken one before their assault on the gate to the Sanctuary, but the fierce fighting had already eaten through their effects, so now they each needed another.

"All right, we managed to split them up. Now we just have to keep them from regrouping. Suzu, you take care of Eri," Shizuku said.

"Okay. Honestly, it was getting kind of hard dealing with her status magic," Suzu replied.

Shizuku's Hundred Onyx Blades, and even Suzu's own familiars, were susceptible to Eri's tricks. Suzu wouldn't be able to do much else if she was busy undoing Eri's status magic, so it made more sense for her to fight Eri away from the main battlefield. That way, Suzu didn't have to worry about protecting everyone from her. Besides, the plan had always been to let Suzu and Eri duke it out on their own. That way, they could separate Kouki from her Spirit Binding's influence.

"I'll leave my familiars with you. They already know to follow your orders, so make good use of them."

"Gotcha... Be careful, Suzu," Ryutarou said, his kind voice at odds with his current ghastly appearance.

Smiling, Suzu nodded at him and replied, "I'll be fine. After I've asked her all the questions I need answered and told her what I want her to know...I'll make sure to give that idiot a good beating!"

"Heh, sounds good. You've got this, Suzu!" Ryutarou said.

"Indeed, you've already made it this far. Now you can go wild. That's what we're going to be doing at least," Shizuku added.

A moment later, the three of them tapped their fists together. Ryutarou's fist was bigger than Shizuku's and Suzu's combined, which made the two of them chuckle a little.

Inaba leaped up onto Suzu's head, at which point the Corpse Apostles finally got moving again. Of the hundred and fifty that remained, half stayed back to stop Shizuku and Ryutarou, while the other half went over to help Eri.

"All right, see you later!" Suzu shouted, riding her wave of cherry blossoms toward where Eri was waiting.

Suddenly, a pillar of light exploded upward from where Kouki had landed, and the buildings near him collapsed. The dragon and mini-dragons had disappeared when Ryutarou had sent Kouki flying, but they had finally returned.

Kouki walked out of the rubble, his eyes devoid of emotion. He pointed his sword at Shizuku, and his dragon let out a roar and unleashed its breath at her.

Unfazed, Shizuku simply said, "Ryutarou, let's put an end to this!"

"You don't gotta tell me twice!"

The two of them resolutely strode forward directly into the deadly blast.

Suzu made her way between the graveyard of skyscrapers on a wave of cherry blossoms with Inaba resting on her head and her butterflies flitting about her. She saw no sign of Eri, not even in the third building that Eri had crashed into. Not only that, but she couldn't even find the Corpse Apostles that had gone running to their master's defense.

It's fine. I already know Eri can't afford to ignore me at this point...

There was a slight possibility that Eri had slipped past her and gone to rejoin Kouki, but Suzu doubted it. After all, Eri Nakamura was no longer capable of ignoring Suzu Taniguchi. Not only because leaving Suzu to roam free would have been a horrible strategic move, but

because Suzu was confident Eri was more pissed off at her than anyone else at present.

Eri had derided, ridiculed, and humiliated Suzu. She'd made it clear that Suzu wasn't even worthy of her attention. And yet, that same pathetic Suzu was now running circles around her.

She's probably fuming... Suzu thought, stiffening a little as she imagined Eri's wrath.

Aside from the muffled explosions she heard in the distance from where Kouki, Shizuku, and Ryutarou were fighting, there was an eerie silence in the streets. She nervously wiped the sweat off her forehead with her sleeve as she looked around, trying to find Eri.

While she had gathered her resolve well before coming here, she was once again reminded that this battlefield could potentially end up her grave...or Eri's. This was a major turning point in her life, so she couldn't help but get a little tense. It was only after meeting Eri again and fighting her on equal terms that Suzu had finally figured out what she wanted to say to her.

But will my words get through to her? If they don't, I'll have to be the one to...

"Squeak, squeak."

"Oh! Thanks, Inaba-san... I guess I got too wrapped up in my thoughts."

Suzu could interpret his squeaks, so she knew he was saying "Don't be so nervous, Suzu my girl. Ye've got me on yer side and there ain't nothing that can stop me."

She let herself relax, and Inaba patted her forehead with his foreleg as if to say, "Good girl."

Smiling a little, Suzu nevertheless remained on guard for surprise attacks. A second later, Inaba let out a startled squeak and did a flip

on Suzu's head, messing up her hair. He then pivoted on his forelegs and delivered a powerful kick to the rear with his hind legs.

There was a burst of sparks and a loud clang of metal clashing against metal as Inaba's greaves hit a glowing gray claymore.

"God, that bunny's annoying."

"Eri," Suzu said, turning around. Her eyes met Eri's, which were full of murderous rage.

Had Inaba not blocked that swing, it would have taken Suzu's head clean off. Eri had used dark magic to hide and rush Suzu with a surprise attack. She was dead serious about killing Suzu.

"Squeak!"

Inaba twirled atop Suzu's head like a break-dancer and launched another kick with his second leg that created a spiraling shockwave. He was using one of his special magics, Air Dance's derivative skill, Cyclone Burst.

Eri flapped her wings and somersaulted away to avoid the attack.

"I heard it takes a lot of time to power up monsters with evolution magic. How'd you make that one so strong so fast?" Eri asked, narrowing her eyes in irritation.

"Oh, Inaba-san's just special. I haven't powered him up much; he was just this strong to begin with."

"Sounds like a load of bullshit to me. Either way, I've got you outnumbered. I bet you don't have too many other familiars that are that strong! Gloom Field!"

Inaba's sense of sight and hearing were obscured by Eri's spell. A black sandstorm blocked his vision, while his ears were assailed by a cacophony of scraping noises. Meanwhile, Eri unleashed a disintegration beam at Suzu and a barrage of disintegration feathers at the butterflies fluttering around her.

“Hallowed Ground - Etherian Citadel!” Suzu exclaimed, casting another original barrier spell. However, this was one she’d come up with on the spot. It was a multifold barrier that created a status-cleansing aura within it.

Five of the barrier’s layers were shaved off instantly, but it bought enough time to cure Inaba’s vision and hearing. However, since Suzu was riding on her cherry blossoms, she couldn’t brace herself against the attack, so she was sent flying. That left her butterflies bereft of her protection, and the disintegration feathers started tearing through them.

“Ngh, I see you took your time to prepare!” Suzu shouted.

“Not just me!” Eri replied, and a second later, a horde of Corpse Apostles swarmed out of the buildings behind Suzu. All of them had fully charged their own disintegration magic. Their mana surged as they prepared to launch a simultaneous assault on Suzu. Unlike before, they were going all out.

Suzu used Aerodynamic to create a platform for herself midair and braced herself. The storm of disintegration magic cut through half of her twenty layers of Hallowed Grounds in an instant. But in that same instant, another ten appeared from within her adaptable citadel to replenish those that had been lost. Suzu’s fortress was powerful enough to keep up with the rate at which disintegration magic shaved it away. She was taking on the combined attacks of nearly eighty Corpse Apostles as well as Eri’s own punishing bombardment without any trouble at all.

Fucking hell, how are her barriers this sturdy?! Eri thought, fuming. If she didn’t know from experience how dangerous it was to let her emotions control her, she would have flown into a rage already.

“Break already—Scatterdust!” Eri exclaimed, using her strongest mana disruption spell, which not only disturbed the mana of the

magic Suzu was using, but even messed with her internal flow of mana.

The twofold interference spell should have sealed Suzu's fate, but—

“Nnnnnnnnng! I can't lose heeeeeeeeere!”

“You've gotta be kidding me...” Eri murmured, shivering in fear.

Despite her best efforts, Suzu's fortress remained unbroken. In fact, Suzu seemed to be bringing her barriers out even faster than before.

“You're good, Eri! I guess I'll have to go all out after all!”

“All out? Don't tell me you were holding back before?!”

“No, not exactly. It's just now that I don't have to worry about protecting everyone, I can focus on my own fight!”

Regardless of the veracity of that claim, Eri was forced to admit she'd misjudged Suzu. True, Suzu had a lot of artifacts helping her out, but her own magical skills were also far greater than Eri remembered.

How hard did she train to get this good?

Eri was so shaken that, for a moment, her control over her own magic wavered. Her disintegration beam weakened, as did her mana disruption spell. And since Suzu was within her own status-curing barrier fortress, the effects of Eri's mana disruption were cured instantly.

“Dance, my petals!”

The cherry blossoms that had been lying dormant around Suzu rose as one and swallowed the Corpse Apostles.

“Hah, those petals are impressive, I'll give you that! Still, they're too puny to break through a disintegration magic barrier!” Eri shouted.

Eri knew the disintegration barriers surrounding the Corpse Apostles would work just as well on Suzu's cherry blossoms as they had on the butterflies' paralyzing scales. And as she had expected, Suzu's petals

couldn't break through the Corpse Apostles' defenses. However, that hadn't been Suzu's aim to begin with. She hadn't brought these petals here to cut up her enemies.

"Bloom into flowers of light—Stardust Flowers!"

There was a blinding flash of light, followed by a deafening explosion. Suzu had made the mana within her cherry blossoms explode all at once. She'd effectively cast a Barrier Burst from all sides and all angles on every single Corpse Apostle.

Momentarily blinded, Eri instinctively backed away. She covered her face with her arm and cocooned herself with her wings. After a few seconds, her vision cleared up, so she unfurled her wings...only to discover that half of her Corpse Apostles had been so badly mangled that they were barely recognizable. And of those that remained, a good chunk were damaged enough that they couldn't fight effectively.

Eri gritted her teeth in frustration, but she didn't even get a chance to curse before Inaba came bounding toward her.

"Squeak, squeak!"

"Tch!"

Inaba's eyes glowed angrily, and he seemed to be saying, "How dare ya hurt my girl! I'mma make you pay!" The rabbit hurtled toward Eri with such speed that she could barely even follow his afterimages.

Inaba twirled three times and launched a blisteringly fast roundhouse kick at Eri's head. With how much speed he'd built up, Inaba's kick was nearly as strong as a blow from Shea's war hammer.

Relying on her enhanced reflexes, Eri brought her swords up to block. Unfortunately, that wasn't enough to absorb the impact of the blow, so she was sent flying with such force that it felt like she'd been hit by a train.

“Squeaaaaaaaaak!”

“You stupid beast!”

Ears fluttering in the wind, Inaba chased after Eri. And as soon as he caught up, he blasted her with a barrage of highly precise kicks.

High kick, low kick, back kick, roundhouse kick—Inaba didn’t let up for a second. Spinning like a top, he threw in a series of spin kicks next. Eri wasn’t able to block them all, and more than a few of the kicks hit her reinforced dress. With each blow, it felt like her internal organs were being run through a blender.

Finally, Inaba finished the assault with a kick so fast that it broke the sound barrier and caused a sonic boom. The sword Eri used to block it was pulverized by the blow.

“This is ridiculous. Even Freid doesn’t have a monster this strong!”

Despite how quickly Eri was flying away, Inaba was able to keep up with just Aerodynamic.

This is one sick joke.

By the end of Inaba’s second assault, Eri’s dress was in tatters and she was on her third sword. Had she not used necromancy to inherit the swordsmanship of a dead swordmaster famed for his defensive techniques, she would have been turned into mincemeat already.

Incensed, Eri let one of Inaba’s kicks shatter her arm, and in return, she unleashed a wave of disintegration magic all around her. Not even a monster as powerful as Inaba could withstand disintegration magic, so he quickly leaped back to Suzu’s side.

Panting, Eri glared at Suzu through the gap in her bangs. Her remaining Corpse Apostles had, of course, been unable to break through Suzu’s citadel. In fact, their numbers had been whittled down even further as Suzu had isolated the injured ones and

destroyed them with Barrier Bursts. There were barely twenty Corpse Apostles left in fighting shape.

"How? How am I the one being pushed back?" Eri muttered, prompting Suzu to face her. "I have a new body, new abilities, and an army of Corpse Apostles, so...why? Why am I the one who's losing? I'm not even fighting that insane monster Nagumo. It's just Suzu. I just have to beat the dumb idiot who's always smiling and doesn't have a care in the world...so why? Why are *you* the one standing there?"

Eri shouted hysterically. She tore at her hair with so much force that Suzu thought she might actually pull a few strands out. She would have looked like a spoiled child throwing a tantrum if she didn't seem so utterly insane.

Suzu stared directly into Eri's madness-stained eyes, her own eyes as serene as the surface of a lake. Then, in a gentle, soothing voice, she said, "Well, that's a simple question to answer. I'm standing here because I want to talk to you."

"Huh?" Eri mumbled, confused. Then, after thinking about it for a few seconds, she drew her own conclusions and said, "Oh, I get it. You want me to grovel at your feet as punishment for what I did to you, right? That's what you worked so hard to do? Ha ha ha, I guess you've become just as twisted as me! Fine, go ahead and laugh. I'll grovel all you want."

Eri sneered at Suzu, her eyes full of venom. Suzu might have considered them best friends, but Eri had seen her as just a tool to be used, so once Suzu had outlived her usefulness, Eri had thrown her away. On top of that, she'd even laughed at Suzu's belief that they'd ever truly been friends. If Suzu had come for revenge, that made things simple. It proved to Eri that Suzu really was just a shallow, stupid girl, and that made her easier to manage in Eri's mind.

But contrary to Eri's expectations, Suzu replied, "Laugh at you? That's not what I came here for. After all...I used you just as much as you used me, Eri."

"What do you mean?" Eri asked, narrowing her eyes. As Suzu had hoped, Eri was genuinely curious.

Inaba switched his attention to the Corpse Apostles to make sure they didn't interrupt this important conversation. However, Eri had also commanded them to stand down for now, so they remained at a distance. The battle had come to a halt.

In a heartfelt voice, Suzu said, "You're right, Eri. I was a smiling, shallow idiot who only cared about making sure no one hated me. The thought of being alone scared me. Loneliness was the one thing I couldn't stand, so I made sure I was always surrounded by a circle of friends."

"Yeah, that's the Suzu I know."

"Right. But that wasn't enough. I needed a 'best friend' as well. After all, what's the point of being hated by no one if you're not close to anyone either?"

The idea of treating everyone equally and fairly sounded nice, but *normal* people weren't like that. Besides, being labeled a people pleaser was something Suzu had wanted to avoid as well.

"Of course, I didn't make a conscious choice to make you specifically my best friend, but ultimately, you're the person who filled the role of 'best friend' in my life."

Suzu had tried to pretend she didn't realize it, but even before Eri had betrayed everyone at the palace, she had suspected in the back of her mind that Eri might not really have been her best friend. Back in the Great Orcus Labyrinth, when she'd seen Shizuku and Kaori struggle to stay together even when their death was all but assured,

Suzu had realized she and Eri didn't have that kind of truly close-knit relationship.

"So? What's your point?" Eri replied brusquely, making Suzu lower her head.

"I'm sorry," Suzu said quietly. "You said I was just a tool for your own ends, but I don't even have the right to be angry about that. After all, I treated you the exact same way."

"Hang on. Don't tell me you came all the way here just to tell me this pointless crap. You really think I give a shit? If so, you're even stupider than I thought. Now that I have Kouki-kun in my grasp, you're less than worthless to me, Suzu," Eri stated, shooting Suzu a condescending look. She couldn't believe Suzu had come here to waste her time with this.

But then, Suzu looked up at her, grinned, and replied, "Yeah, I know. I'm doing this for myself, not you. I just wanted to apologize to clear my conscience."

"Well, you've definitely gotten cheekier since the last time I saw you, I'll give you that. So, are we done here?"

"No, there are still some questions I want to ask you. Hey, Eri, why did you fall in love with Kouki-kun?"

"Huh?"

Suzu had brought that up as if they were just making small talk on their way home from school. Eri honestly couldn't believe that was Suzu's big question, but before she could even say anything, Suzu fired off a barrage of follow-up questions.

"Also, were you having trouble at home? You came over to my house a bunch, but you never let me visit your place, so I figured maybe things weren't so great there. You also never talked about your mom or dad. Did they not get along? Oh, wait, did Kouki help you out

when you were having family problems? Is that why you fell for him?”

Suzu was really tempting fate by asking all of those probing questions. She hadn’t been this bold in the past, so she’d never worked up the courage to ask such personal questions before. Moreover, her guesses were surprisingly close to the mark.

While Suzu had pretended not to notice anything, she had actually been paying quite a lot of attention to Eri. She just hadn’t wanted to strain their relationship, so she’d avoided saying anything. Contrary to appearances, she was rather perceptive. In fact, the reason Suzu had unconsciously chosen Eri as her “best friend” might have been because she sympathized with Eri’s plight.

Suzu’s own family situation hadn’t been the greatest growing up. Thus, she’d sensed something similar from Eri, which might have been why she’d chosen Eri.

Either way, Eri was not at all happy that Suzu was reopening old wounds with a smile on her face. And so, instead of answering, she blasted Suzu with disintegration magic. Suzu’s smile grew even bigger, as Eri’s reaction told her that she was guessing correctly. She then casually summoned her citadel to defend herself.

A haphazard attack launched in frustration had no chance of breaking through a barrier master’s defenses, so it obviously failed to reach Suzu.

“Come on, Eri, tell me. I want to know more about you. I called you my best friend, but I never really tried to get to know you, so now I want to change that.”

“You’ve turned into one mean bitch since I last saw you, Suzu. Or wait, were you always like this? Either way, I—”

“Quit changing the subject, Eri. What happened? What made you so twisted? Why are you so obsessed with Kouki-kun? Please, tell me.”

“Oh, shut up!”

Calm down! I need to keep a clear head. My enemy's just a weak human. I don't need huge attacks to take her down. One concentrated, precise burst is all I need... Eri repeated such calming thoughts over and over in her head as she started gathering mana at the edge of her blade.

“Haaah!” Eri roared. Gritting her teeth, she rose high into the sky and reversed her grip on her sword. She then launched herself at Suzu, sword held out in front of her.

This was one of the sword techniques she'd inherited through necromancy, Falling Fang. Normally, you were supposed to use wind magic to launch yourself up and then use your body weight to accelerate the falling thrust and break through the enemy's barrier at a single point, but Eri could, of course, fly instead, and she was also enhancing her thrust with concentrated disintegration magic.

“Even this isn't enough to break through?!” she exclaimed in shock as Suzu's barriers halted even her prized thrust.

“I can focus all my mana on a single point too, you know?” Suzu replied cheerfully. There was no scorn, anger, or hatred in Suzu's expression. It was clear that she genuinely did just want to learn more about Eri. However, that just pissed Eri off even more.

“Besides, you said you've been apostleified, but you're at least twenty, no, thirty percent weaker than an actual apostle. Kaori showed me firsthand what real disintegration magic can do.”

“Are you saying I'm inferior?!”

“It's just an objective analysis. You're not even using two swords at once. That's because you can't, right? You weren't able to copy a real apostle's swordsmanship. It looks like you used necromancy to master Meld-san's instead, but his swordsmanship was focused on

defense. Well, it's thanks to that defensive swordsmanship that you were able to survive Inaba-san's assault, so it's not like it's useless."

Once again, all of Suzu's conjectures were right on the mark.

"Don't get cocky!"

A tendril of fear crept into Eri's voice, but she quickly shook it off, unwilling to accept that *Suzu*, of all people, could have overwhelmed her. She then put even more strength into her thrust and added more mana into her disintegration magic. And yet, she couldn't pierce through Suzu's sturdy barrier. It was like facing off against a physical manifestation of Suzu's resolve.

"I'm not going to avert my eyes any longer. I'm tired of losing the things I care about because I pretended not to see the truth. I'm tired of losing the things I care about because I didn't try to fix my own ignorance! So please, Eri, tell me more about yourself!"

"Shut up! There's no point in learning about me now!"

Eri kicked off Suzu's barrier and flew away. Realizing her sword couldn't break through, she fired another disintegration beam at Suzu. She was trying to force things into a battle of attrition. Her limitless supply of mana was the biggest advantage she had over Suzu, after all.

Eri's Corpse Apostles also jumped into action, as did Inaba.

"Yes there is," Suzu said firmly, heedless of the disintegration beam striking her citadel. "I want to learn more about you, to know about how you think so that...I can be your friend once again."

Eri was so shocked that her disintegration beam faltered and she asked, "What did you just say?"

That was the last thing she had expected Suzu to say. After all, she'd betrayed Suzu in the cruelest way possible, killed a bunch of people, and was trying to kill her right now. Only an insane person would ask

to be friends again after all that. If this was some kind of new mental attack, then it was working. There was nothing that could have caught Eri off guard as much as that statement.

“Do you think it’s weird?” Suzu asked. “I mean, it definitely is. You did all those horrible things...and you’re trying to kill me even now.”

“Did you finally lose your mind?”

“No, I’m perfectly sane, thank you very much. I know it’s weird to still want to be friends after everything that’s happened, but it’s how I really feel. I mean, I still remember...”

“Remember what?”

“Your smile.”

Eri seemed even more confused by that response, but Suzu didn’t seem to mind. Her smile turned nostalgic and she added, “Your smiles were normally so reserved, and I realize now that those were probably all fake, but you know...there were times when you came to sleep at my house, or when we were talking on our way home from school, or when we went to the park on the weekends to kill time that you’d make these kinds of lazy smiles, or give me this sardonic grin, where it felt like you really were having fun. I remember those smiles.”

“.....”

“If you really were just putting on an act the entire time, you wouldn’t have smiled like that, right? Weren’t those glimpses of emotion that showcased your real feelings? Wasn’t the only time you were even a little happy when you were hanging out with me? I think that’s the case, at least.”

Eri said nothing in response. Her bangs hid her eyes, and the light of her disintegration beam made it difficult to make out her expression.

Now that Suzu was no longer afraid of being hated, her words carried an immense amount of weight. She was willing to risk losing Eri completely because she knew that if she didn't force herself down this thorny path, she'd never truly get what she wanted.

"Come back to us, Eri. You and Kouki-kun can still join us. Living in a world with only you two in it is far too sad. I want to be with you, Eri. For as long as possible, even. And I want us to be actual best friends this time around."

"....."

Suzu flicked one of her fans closed and put it in the holster at her waist. She then held her hand out toward Eri.

"If you take my hand, I swear I won't let anyone hurt you. No matter what anyone says, even if Nagumo-kun turns against me, I'll protect you, Eri!"

Suzu's determined voice echoed through the ruined city. She was dead serious. This was her true heart's desire. If Eri took her hand, she would never go back on her word.

Eri's disintegration beam continued to grow weaker and weaker, dwindling into a thin thread and then disappearing altogether. The Corpse Apostles stopped moving, and Inaba likewise stood in place, waiting to see what would happen.

Suzu dismissed her citadel. She didn't want any walls between her and Eri. The black butterflies were all that remained, fluttering gently between the two girls.

It was like a scene from a fairy tale, the two of them staring at each other as butterflies fluttered through the air like cherry blossoms.

Suzu stretched her arm out as far as it would go, hoping, praying that her feelings reached her. She kept her gaze fixed on her as well, determined to make Eri her best friend once more.

After what seemed like an eternity, Eri finally looked up. However, her eyes were filled not with joy, but with cold, hard scorn.

“You really are a moron.”

“Ah!” Suzu yelped and stiffened up. Her fingers trembled, and her eyes welled up with tears.

A second later, a bright light appeared far overhead. She reflexively looked up and saw a huge magic circle filling the sky above her.

“That gray light... When did you—?”

Indeed, that magic circle was made up entirely of gray feathers. In other words, Eri had made it herself. She’d realized that she couldn’t break through Suzu’s barrier a long time ago, so she’d decided to play along to get her to lower it herself.

“Honestly, I wanted to fuck you up with my own two hands, but you deserve this for getting so damn cocky.”

Thick black miasma started spewing out of the magic circle in the sky. It looked exactly like the stuff that had flowed out of the fissure in the sky that had appeared above the Divine Mountain. And much like that one, this magic circle was a summoning spell.

After a few seconds, what looked like black rain began falling on the city. And as the downpour grew closer, Suzu realized what she had thought were droplets were actually monsters. Eri had summoned forth a horde as strong as the swarm of monsters that inhabited the abyss.

“I’m tired of your crap. Drown in a sea of monsters and die.”

“.....” Suzu remained silent, refusing to respond to Eri’s remark.

How does Eri truly feel? Does she really not care at all about anything I said?

Suzu couldn't figure out the true meaning of Eri's cold, inscrutable stare.

The monsters had fallen far enough that Suzu could make out their individual characteristics. Most were wyverns, but there were also four-legged beasts that were using special magic to create footholds in the air for themselves. Hundreds had already come out of the magic circle, yet more spilled forth each second. For as strong as Inaba was, even he couldn't handle such a huge army on his own.

Based on the explosions in the distance, Shizuku and Ryutarou were in no position to rush to Suzu's aid either. At this rate, she would be overwhelmed with numbers.

Eri had thrown away her pride and resolved to kill Suzu by any means necessary, even if it meant relying on more than just her own abilities. But even though Suzu's words had failed to sway Eri's heart, even though the hand she'd offered had been brushed aside like dirt, Suzu refused to give up.

"Inaba-san! Take care of the magic circle!"

"Squeak, squeak!" Inaba exclaimed as he kicked off his aerial platform and shot up toward the magic circle. As he rose, he kicked against the air multiple times, accelerating his ascent to ludicrous speeds.

Meanwhile, Suzu pulled out the fan she'd put away and spread it out in front of her, shaking away the tears in her eyes.

"Was it really a good idea to send your bodyguard away?" Eri asked with a sneer, ordering her Corpse Apostles to attack while she gathered her mana to fire another disintegration beam at Suzu. She wanted to end this farce as soon as possible, so she chose to go all out.

However, Eri never managed to actually shoot that beam.

“What?!” she exclaimed as a few of her own Corpse Apostles turned to fire their disintegration attacks at her. She sidestepped out of the way, then noticed that the Corpse Apostles that weren’t attacking her rose up to intercept the wave of monsters.

“How? Why aren’t they following my orders?!”

“They spent too long looking at my butterflies,” Suzu replied.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Eri had made sure to shoot down as many butterflies as she could, and she had kept a close eye on them to ensure their paralyzing scales didn’t incapacitate her Corpse Apostles. Those paralyzing scales should have been the butterflies’ only special magic, since monsters were only supposed to have one variety of special magic. They could have had derivative skills that stemmed from that root special magic, but whatever was going on clearly had nothing to do with paralysis.

Suzu swung her fan down, and one of her butterflies landed on her hair, adorning it like an accessory.

“These butterflies’ real special magic is the power to cause hallucinations in anyone who sees the patterns on their wings. The paralysis scales were just a front,” she explained.

“No way...”

“Yep. Right now your Corpse Apostles think you’re me and that your monsters are my familiars.”

The special magic didn’t activate immediately when someone saw the butterflies’ wings. It was a slow hypnosis that took time to take root in the victims’ minds. The paralysis scales had been nothing more than an illusion, a holographic projection that was one of the derivative skills of the butterflies’ main hypnosis special magic.

Once again, Eri was shocked by how prepared Suzu had been. However, she still held the upper hand. While the Corpse Apostles *were* powerful, they were vastly outnumbered. A mere twenty apostles weren't enough to protect Suzu from the horde. Eri kept telling herself that to shake off her unease, but then she heard a series of massive explosions. Fireworks bloomed in the sky above the ruined city. The butterflies that had flown up to meet the army of monsters had exploded upon coming into contact with them.

Eri covered her face with her arms as a wave of heat washed over her. When she could finally look up again, her enhanced vision showed her a torrent of blood and flesh raining down, while Inaba smashed through the magic circle she'd worked so hard to build.

Inaba had charged straight through the army of monsters, so his armor had taken quite a beating, but he'd successfully reached his destination and completed his mission nonetheless. Due to his efforts, no more monsters came through the summoning circle, and only five hundred or so of the initial army remained.

As blood and gore rained down around her, Suzu quietly murmured, "Did you really think I'd managed to turn thousands of butterflies into my familiars over just three days?"

"If the paralysis was a front, then... Oh, I see. The rest were all fakes. They were golems, like those swords, right?"

Suzu nodded with a smile, admitting to her ruse. The vast majority of the butterfly swarm had been made up of biological golems that Hajime had made. The paralyzing effect of the scales had actually come from the toxic spray that they'd been spreading constantly.

"Oh, and all of the fake butterflies have tiny Treasure Troves attached to them filled to the brim with explosives. Nagumo-kun said the explosives could blow up anything a dozen meters around them. It's pretty scary stuff, honestly."

Suzu's fans began to glow as she spoke. Orange light radiated from their center, spreading out to the ribs of the fans in a beautiful geometric pattern.

"Hmph, I've still got more than enough monsters to bury you," Eri replied dismissively. "As long as I keep them away from the butterflies, you—"

Suzu didn't even wait for her to finish before chanting, "Enclose them all, great barrier of isolation. Bring forth a dimension of unending desolation. Heed my call, inescapable cradle of death—Hallowed Ground - Shrine of Oblivion!"

That was the longest incantation Suzu had recited yet. Orange mana spread out radially around her, covering everything up to a kilometer out and two kilometers above her. Then, a huge, cylindrical barrier shimmered into existence at the edges of her mana burst. All of the monsters Eri had summoned were encased within it. Only Inaba—who'd known what was coming—had managed to escape the barrier's reach.

Panting, Suzu waved her fans with trembling hands to draw a barrier around herself as well.

"This is a spatial barrier. Trying to break it will cause it to destroy the space around you."

Suzu had whipped out her ultimate trump card. It was clear from how pale she was that she'd used the vast majority of her mana on this spell, but it was well worth it.

Eri lowered her sword and stared at Suzu. Even though her Corpse Apostles were killing her monsters and Suzu's butterflies were exploding periodically, the battlefield felt eerily silent.

"Is this really the end of the line? Ha ha ha, I don't believe it. To think it'd be Suzu, of all people, who'd mess up my plans. You should have

just been cowering in a corner while Ehit destroyed the world. This is all that unstoppable monster's fault."

"You're right. Nagumo-kun helped us out a lot. Honestly, I wouldn't have gotten this far without his artifacts. But you know..." a note of longing mixed with determination entered Suzu's voice as she trailed off. "I'm here because this is what *I* decided to do. I'm here because *I knew* that if I didn't force my way here, I'd never see you again. And if that happened, you'd lose even the smallest traces of happiness you used to feel."

"So, what, you're saying you did all this for me?"

"Yeah, that's right. Though I also did it for my own selfish reasons. I want to be your friend again, so..."

This was the last chance Suzu had to get through to Eri. She didn't know why, but she was certain it was. Not caring if she screamed herself hoarse, Suzu shouted with all the determination she could muster, roaring, "Take my hand, Eri!"

Eri once again fell silent. She looked up, her empty eyes reflecting the sky and her lips curled up in the faintest hint of a sardonic smile.

"I'm done..." she muttered, gray mana flaring up around her. She once again prepared to launch a disintegration beam, her face twisted into a painful snarl as tears of blood streaked down her cheeks.

Eri had never tried to harness this much mana at once, but she knew unless she did, she'd never break through Suzu's defenses. Thus, she sent her feathers out to create yet another extremely intricate magic circle.

"I'll grind you into duuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuust!" she exclaimed as she unleashed a composite dark spell that messed with all five senses at once and also disrupted the flow of mana within her target to make it go berserk.

As soon as she fired off the spell, she desperately charged at Suzu with her claymore, yelling,
“Dieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

Eri had poured everything she had left into this final attack, and it was her strongest one yet.

She wanted to make it crystal clear that Suzu had only two options. She had to either let herself get killed or kill Eri first. No matter what happened, Eri refused to grab hold of Suzu’s hand.

Sensing her resolve, Suzu bit her lip so hard she drew blood. Unfortunately, her determination hadn’t been enough. Despite how hard she’d struggled, her hand hadn’t reached Eri.

“Why did things have to end up like this...? Actually, I guess that’s too cliché even for me.”

Forcing a smile through her tears, Suzu watched as Eri’s claymore tore through her barrier and pierced her chest. An insane smile appeared on Eri’s fearsome visage as she grew sure of her victory. But then she watched Suzu break apart and turn into a flock of black butterflies.

“Ah!”

Eri’s eyes widened in surprise. She then caught sight of another flock of butterflies at the edge of her vision and turned to see the real Suzu appear behind them. This was the Suzu who’d actually cast Shrine of Oblivion.

It took Eri only a moment to realize what had happened. She’d been staring at the butterflies too, so it only made sense that she’d been affected by the hallucinations. While Eri had been gathering her mana, Suzu had had ample time to leave a decoy in her place and get behind Eri. The concentration that was required to cast such a powerful spell had worked against Eri.

While Eri was fuming, Suzu looked surprisingly dispassionate as she raised her hands into the air. However, her fingers were trembling...and not just from exhaustion.

“Return to the light from whence you came—Shrine of Oblivion - Final Seal,” Suzu proclaimed as she swung both her fans down, prompting the massive barrier Eri and her monsters were encased in to flicker.

Eri lowered her sword in defeat shortly before a blinding burst of orange light overwhelmed her. The accompanying explosion and shockwave stopped at the edges of the Shrine of Oblivion, and no sound escaped the barrier either. Nothing could have survived that maelstrom of spatial destruction. Except, of course, Suzu, who was protected by her own spatial barrier.

Eventually, the storm of orange light faded, leaving silence in its wake. Lumps of monster and Corpse Apostle flesh littered the ground, covered by the rubble of pulverized buildings. The remains of Eri’s undead creations were barely recognizable. And Eri was there as well, bleeding out atop a pile of rubble.

Inaba lightly hopped on top of Suzu’s head and tenderly patted her forehead with his foreleg. Suzu tried to give him a reassuring smile, but all that came out was a choked sob. And after a few seconds, she finally flew down to Eri’s location.

Thanks to the sturdiness granted by her apostleification, Eri had managed to barely cling to life.

“Gah... Kill...me...” she gasped, her empty eyes gazing off into the distance.

“Eri...”

“Friends? Hah, don’t make me laugh... I’d rather die than...be your...”

“.....”

Eri had made her choice, and unfortunately, she was just as stubborn as Suzu.

“This is all so stupid. I just wanted...”

“Just wanted what? Tell me, Eri.”

“.....” Eri clammed up, refusing to divulge any more of her inner thoughts to Suzu. Vitality slowly leaked out of her, and if Suzu did nothing, she really would die in a few minutes.

Suzu pulled a small vial out of her Treasure Trove. The restorative draft inside wasn’t quite as powerful as Ambrosia, but it still had the power to save Eri from the brink of death. But when Eri saw what Suzu was trying to do, she glared at her with more strength than Suzu thought she had left in her.

Though Eri said nothing, her gaze spoke volumes. She refused to accept charity from Suzu, even if it meant her death.

Suzu squeezed the vial tight, gritted her teeth, and thought, *Is this really how things are going to end?*

Of course, she’d come here prepared, knowing this might be the outcome, but that didn’t stop it from hurting. Feeling a stabbing pain in her chest, Suzu nevertheless prepared to deal the final blow.

If Eri didn’t want to be with Suzu, then dragging her back by force would accomplish nothing. Suzu had to make peace with that fact. Half-assed measures would simply lead to a repeat of the tragedy at Heiligh Castle.

Suzu knew from painful experience what happened when you averted your gaze from reality and clung to convenient lies. If her words had failed to reach Eri, the least she could do was put an end to this herself. After all, for all that their relationship had been built on lies, Suzu and Eri had still been best friends. And it was precisely because Suzu still wanted to be a true friend to Eri that she steeled

her resolve and stowed the vial. Gripping her fan instead, she looked Eri in the eyes. However, before she could deal the finishing blow, an explosion of mana resounded out in the distance.

Kouki's giant white dragon grew to even larger proportions, then transformed into the shape of a man.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

It was hard to tell whether that roar was one of defiance or a pained cry.

"Kouki-kun?" Eri muttered, her eyes fluttering open. If nothing else, she'd clearly interpreted the roar as the latter.

The light giant swung its fist at the ground, causing an earthquake that could be felt all the way over where Suzu and Eri were. For a few seconds, they just stared in awe, but then the light giant dimmed and vanished...almost as if that attack had been its owner's last, desperate attempt to struggle for his life.

"Kouki-kun... Kouki-kun!"

"E-Eri?!"

Despite her mortal injuries, Eri managed to wreath herself in mana and materialize her wings. Forcing herself to her feet, she lumbered into the air and flew off toward where the giant of light had vanished, toward Kouki.

Suzu simply stared in shock for a few seconds, but then she regained her senses and hurriedly pulled out her Skyboard. Forcing her exhausted body into action, she flew after Eri.

Chapter III: Their Own Endings

A few minutes before Suzu and Eri started rushing toward them, Shizuku and Ryutarou were struggling to survive Kouki's onslaught. Of the seventy Corpse Apostles that had remained behind to help him, only ten had been slain.

Suzu had left behind her familiars to help Shizuku and Ryutarou, but they were still being pushed back. The reason for that was simple: Kouki's control over his Divine Wrath of a Thousand Forms was growing by the minute and his huge dragon was now able to throw out precise attacks while bathing everyone with its breath, and the fifty mini-dragons were also firing off precise breath attacks.

“Divine Wrath - Imperial Vortex!”

Imperial Vortex was normally a wind spell that created a tornado that shot out horizontally, but Kouki was creating a light spell version of it with Divine Wrath. However, he wasn’t using it as an attack. Instead, he was creating a tunnel of light to keep people from interrupting him. And once he’d created the light tunnel, he dashed behind Ryutarou and shouted, “Divine Wrath - Shining Blade!”

“Whoa!”

Ryutarou immediately turned around and crossed his ogreified arms to block. He also double-activated Diamond Skin, but even then, the blade of light that hit him blasted through his defensive magic and scored a deep groove in his gauntlets.

“Don’t underestimate me!” he exclaimed as he used the ogre’s special magic, Impact Manipulator, to disperse the force of the blow, allowing him to take the attack without being pushed back. Ryutarou then countered with a front kick, but Kouki immediately leaped back to avoid it.

“Divine Wrath - Tenfold!”

A shotgun blast of Divine Wraths shot out of Kouki's sword, targeting Ryutarou.

"Demonic Fists - Thousand Blows!"

Ryutarou planted his feet firmly on the ground and launched a flurry of punches at the Divine Wraths, his gauntlets glowing emerald-green with his mana. Thanks to his ogre strength, each punch had the force of a cannonball. Deafening booms rang out each time Ryutarou's fists collided with one of Kouki's Divine Wraths. In terms of power, they were about equal, but Kouki had far more trump cards up his sleeve than Ryutarou.

"Shit!" Ryutarou roared as he realized the light dragon was bearing down on him from behind. Its jaws closed around Ryutarou's torso, and he could hear his armor crack. Normally, Ryutarou would have been vaporized just from coming in contact with the dragon's fangs, which were made of highly compressed Divine Wraths. It was only thanks to his ogre form's toughness that he was able to survive, but in this state, he couldn't even use his Diamond Skin.

"Group Five, Shock Impact!"

Four of Shizuku's blades came out of nowhere and skewered the dragon's head, forcing it to release Ryutarou.

"Thanks for the save, Shizuku!"

Shizuku didn't reply, mostly because she didn't have the time to spare. She was blitzing across the battlefield, appearing in one place one second and another the next.

Now that she'd used Limiter Removal, she could sustain insane speeds for a long period of time, something Instant Transcendence didn't allow for, even if it was far more efficient. Though she was burning through her mana at an incredible rate, Shizuku needed this much power to handle all the Corpse Apostles and mini-dragons she was fighting at once. And even then, she couldn't get any decisive

blows in, while her own arsenal of Onyx Blades had been whittled down to half their original number.

One of Kouki's mini-dragons swallowed yet another blade, though it was sturdy enough to survive for a few seconds, so it managed to extricate itself with a spatial-severing slice. Unfortunately, cutting through one mini-dragon wasn't enough, since another quickly came to take its place and finally melted through the katana's protections.

Suzu's familiars were similarly hard-pressed. Half of them had already fallen. The praying mantises had all been annihilated, and since Kouki's dragon had taken out the nearby buildings, the spiders had nowhere left to hide, leaving only one of those left alive as well.

Are you still not ready, Shizuku? I'm not gonna be able to hold on much longer! Ryutarou thought.

A second later, Kouki shouted, "Celestial Flash Burst!"

A series of crescent-moon-shaped slashes sped toward Ryutarou.

"Nuorryaaaaaaaah!"

Relying on brute strength over skill, Ryutarou grabbed a ten-meter-tall chunk of rubble and threw it at the attacks. Even with his considerable strength, such a feat wouldn't have been possible outside his ogre form. The Celestial Flashes pierced through the rubble like Swiss cheese, but they did slow down and weaken a little, which was all Ryutarou needed.

"Doryaaaaah!"

Ryutarou barreled through the weakened Celestial Flashes and charged at Kouki.

"Metamorph Fist - Armor Penetrator!"

The gauntlet on his right hand changed shape, transforming into a lance. It burned red-hot, melting anything it came into contact with.

"I can read you like a book, Ryutarou," Kouki said, easily sidestepping the attack. He was simply too fast for Ryutarou. After that, he ordered his dragon, which had circled to Ryutarou's left flank, to fire another wave of breath at him.

Ryutarou wanted to jump out of the way, but then he sensed Shizuku behind him and instead crossed his arms in front of him again to guard.

"Shizuku, dodge!" he shouted a second before the dragon's breath hit him. His body screamed in pain as the breath tore through his innate Diamond Skin.

As soon as he saw that Shizuku had leaped to safety, he jumped to the side himself. The beam of white light shot past him, incinerating an unlucky Corpse Apostle and familiar that happened to be in the line of fire.

"Koukiii! You lined us up on purpose, didn't you, you bastard?!"

"You guys are my childhood friends. It's not hard to lure you into moving the way I want you to."

"Hah, that's what you think!" Ryutarou retorted as Shizuku appeared beside him.

"Ryutarou, you okay?!"

"Yeah, this is nothing!"

Despite what he said, there was smoke coming off him and most of his body was badly burned. And so, Shizuku grabbed two recovery potions from her Treasure Trove and handed one to Ryutarou while she drank the second to recover her own mana.

"Since you're here, we've got some good news, right?" Ryutarou asked as he drank his potion.

"Yep. Good job keeping Kouki distracted. Thanks to you, I managed to see what I needed to."

"Hah, glad to hear it," Ryutarou replied cheerfully. "Looks like it's time for our comeback! It would be pretty pathetic if we lost two-on-one, seeing as Suzu's handling her fight solo and all."

"Tell me about it. It's about time that idiot got the punch to the face that he deserves!"

Upon hearing that, Kouki shook his head in exasperation. With how the fight had been going thus far, he was confident that he wouldn't lose. He'd only let them have their conversation because he'd hoped they would realize the futility of fighting back and surrender. Sadly, they hadn't.

"You guys surprised me a few times, but my stats are way too high compared to yours. Give it up already. I'm worried about Eri, so I want to get this over with as fast as possible."

Kouki held his sword aloft, and his dragon and all of his mini-dragons began charging their breath again. Ignoring the familiars entirely, he had the Corpse Apostles retreat to a safe distance. He clearly planned to obliterate everything on the battlefield in one fell swoop.

In response, Shizuku and Ryutarou prepared their own trump cards.

"Grant me the power to surpass heaven itself—Supreme Ascendance!"

"Fusion Transformation - Wereogre!"

Supreme Ascendance was an evolution magic spell that surpassed even Limiter Removal, while Fusion Transformation was a metamorphosis magic spell that combined the best traits of Ryutarou's two strongest transformations without either of their drawbacks. Bright blue mana swirled around Shizuku, while Ryutarou transformed into a werewolf with an ogre's physique and horns.

“You still had something left up your sleeve?!” Kouki exclaimed. Shizuku and Ryutarou didn’t bother to respond, and they ignored the meteor shower of white light that headed straight for them as well.

“Let’s kick things off by getting rid of those annoying Corpse Apostles!” Shizuku said to Ryutarou.

“Gotcha!” he replied, and the two of them vanished.

The Corpse Apostles had been charging their own disintegration attacks off at the edge of the battlefield, but now Shizuku and Ryutarou suddenly appeared at their flanks, beheading two of them before they even had time to register the threat.

“Group One - Dive! Group Two - Carve! Group Four - Strike!”

“Familiars, slow the Corpse Apostles down!”

Due to how fast Shizuku and Ryutarou were moving, it sounded like their orders were coming from all over at the same time.

“Holy shit, that’s fast!” Kouki exclaimed. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get a good lock on either of them. His sweeping barrages only managed to hit Corpse Apostles and familiars.

Meanwhile, the first group of Shizuku’s katanas dived underground, shooting up from the Corpse Apostles’ blind spots to skewer them from below. And at the same time, the second group sliced open spatial portals near the Corpse Apostles. Those portals weren’t as precise as those made by Suzu, but they were good enough for the fourth group of blades to use to slice up the Corpse Apostles from unexpected angles.

The Corpse Apostles couldn’t deal with attacks from so many directions at once, so they fell one after another in quick succession.

Of course, Shizuku herself wasn’t idle during this time either.

“Blitz!”

The portals she opened herself were, of course, far more precise, and she could get powerful pinpoint attacks off. And all of these new techniques were only possible thanks to her Supreme Ascendance. Her newfound speed was so great that the Corpse Apostles couldn't even put up a fight as they were eviscerated.

Ryutarou had a similarly easy time destroying Corpse Apostles with his werewolf speed and ogre strength.

The few remaining Corpse Apostles tried to flee to the skies and mount a coordinated defense, but the familiars kept getting in their way, allowing Ryutarou to rip through them. However, while it looked like they were demolishing everything with ease, Shizuku and Ryutarou were struggling quite a bit.

Ngh, this is rough. I feel like I'm gonna pass out any second now.

Using metamorphosis magic to transform yourself into two creatures at once was no easy feat, and Ryutarou hadn't had nearly enough practice with the skill. He was working mostly off of intuition, and with the burden it placed on his body, he couldn't keep the form active for longer than forty seconds. If he tried to push past that limit, he would lose his humanity and transform into a monster for real. Shizuku was under a similar time limit as well; when her Supreme Ascendance wore off, she'd be hit with fatigue comparable to the side effects of using Limit Break.

Thus, Shizuku and Ryutarou needed to go as fast as possible to kill all the Corpse Apostles and take Kouki down before they ran out of time.

“I’m getting tired of your games!” Kouki shouted in irritation. With the way he was firing off breath attacks and Celestial Flashes in all directions, he was basically a mobile fortress.

Shizuku and Ryutarou had to keep their movements as random as possible to avoid being tagged by an errant attack from Kouki, which slowed down the rate at which they took out the Corpse Apostles.

Please let there be enough time! Shizuku and Ryutarou thought simultaneously, and just then, a flock of black butterflies appeared on the battlefield.

The remaining Corpse Apostles stiffened, then turned to each other in confusion.

“What?! What’s going on?!” Kouki shouted in confusion, while Shizuku and Ryutarou grinned.

“All groups, bury the remaining Corpse Apostles!”

“Familiars, you go too!”

There were still ten seconds left before Shizuku and Ryutarou hit their time limit. With the Corpse Apostles more or less taken care of, they both turned around and charged at their main target.

"Kouki!!!!!!!" Ryutarou screamed.

By the time Kouki realized he was under attack, it was already too late. He barely turned in time to see Ryutarou, and he couldn't do a single thing to defend himself before Ryutarou's fist slammed into his solar plexus.

Ryutarou was using his ogre strength, his werewolf speed, Impact Manipulator, and the skill Giant Slayer to maximize the force of his punch. Of course, all of that was complemented by the considerable karate skills he had cultivated since childhood.

Kouki doubled over, coughing up blood. He then stumbled backward, barely managing to stay on his feet.

“Hope that helped you wake up, friend,” Ryutarou said in a cheerful voice

“Ngh, Ryuta—”

“If it didn’t, have another. It’s about time you came back to your senses!”

“Gah!”

Ryutarou followed up with a palm thrust to Kouki’s chest, sending him flying.

The force of the blow drove the air from Kouki’s lungs, causing his vision to flicker.

As he sailed through the air, he reflexively tried to get into a defensive stance and ordered his dragon to protect him. Even when there wasn’t time for conscious thought, he instinctively knew Shizuku would be waiting for him where he landed, which made him deathly afraid.

Goosebumps rose on his skin as he turned around and indeed saw Shizuku waiting to cut him down. There was an absolutely insane amount of blue mana concentrated around her sheathed blade. Her sheath was straining under the pressure of containing that much mana, and some of it was leaking out from the gap between the hilt and the sheath.

“Shizukuuu!” Kouki yelled, not even sure why he was yelling anymore. He then desperately stuck his blade into the ground in an emergency attempt to halt his momentum.

“Accept your punishment—True Strike!”

After letting out that short incantation, Shizuku vanished.



She then reappeared behind him, and a thin flash of light bisected Kouki.

“Ah...!”

A second later, Kouki felt the force of Shizuku’s cut course through him. He slumped to the ground, but to his utter surprise, he realized he felt no pain. Panicking, he patted himself down and realized that there was no cut anywhere on his body.

“Shizuku, did you finally...? Wait, what happened to my mana?!”

For a moment, Kouki thought Shizuku hadn’t been able to bring herself to cut him down after all, but then he realized what it was that Shizuku’s cut had done.

His massive dragon began to sag, as did all of his mini-dragons. They then all split in half before dispersing into nothingness. However, Kouki barely even noticed. He was far more worried about the fact that all of his mana was leaving him. He should have had a limitless supply, provided to him directly by Ehit, but any mana that filled him seemed to drain right out like water in a bucket with a hole in it.

“E-Even my Limit Break is...”

Drained of his mana, Kouki was unable to maintain his Limit Break. He dropped to all fours, struggling not to collapse entirely.

Shizuku and Ryutarou stood a short distance away from him. Shizuku’s Supreme Ascendance and Ryutarou’s Fusion Transformation had both worn off, and they were breathing heavily, but they still kept their guard up just in case.

“Shi...zuku... What did you do to me?” Kouki asked in a trembling voice.

Shizuku slipped her katana a few inches out of its scabbard and said, “Did you know, spirit magic lets you directly affect the intangible

energy every person possesses? This katana of mine can cut through that energy.”

After Shizuku had acquired evolution magic, Hajime had upgraded her katana and given it the power to cut through souls. Shizuku had then further improved that ability with her own evolution magic, which had led to the birth of the skill True Strike. True Strike could cut through not just a person’s soul, but also their mana, their stamina, their mental state, and even the various positive and negative spells that were affecting them without harming their body at all.

“It took some time to figure out where exactly I needed to cut to sever your link to your mana supply and slice through the Spirit Binding, but...”

All great martial art techniques required impeccable precision. And in order to achieve that precision, Shizuku had needed perfectly accurate information. Fortunately, the true nature of evolution magic was the ability to interfere with information on an abstract level, so she’d had the tools necessary to gather that information. With the help of her artifacts, Shizuku had been carefully studying Kouki...and it had taken until just a second ago to gather the information needed to even use her True Strike.

“A true swordsman’s strokes cut through only that which they desire. I cheated a little to get to that point, but ultimately, I made it there.”

“I don’t...believe it...”

Even after hearing Shizuku’s explanation, Kouki couldn’t understand. Of course, he obviously understood that Shizuku had reached master swordswoman status. One look at her eyes was enough to tell him she hadn’t gotten this far solely thanks to her artifacts. Her ironclad will and her determination to cut only that which she wished to without destroying anything else had brought her this far. His

childhood friend had reached the fabled level of mastery where she was simultaneously as calm as still water and as fierce as a raging fire. And despite being the legendary hero, Kouki hadn't even come close to reaching that point.

"It looks like I messed up, though. I thought I'd cut through your Spirit Binding, but from the looks of it, you're still daydreaming, aren't you?"

Twenty of Shizuku's golem blades and four of Suzu's familiars—a centipede, a hornet, and two ants—came over after eliminating the last of the Corpse Apostles and lined up behind Shizuku.

In a pleading voice, Kouki said, "Shizuku... You didn't kill me because...you still care about me, right? I knew you were still in there...when I didn't sense any bloodlust from you..."

"Kouki..." Shizuku muttered.

"It's okay... Ryutarou didn't try to kill me either. I'll definitely save both of you and—"

Shizuku drew her blade in one fluid motion and sliced through Kouki again, cutting him off.

"Did you get it this time?" Ryutarou asked, patting Shizuku's shoulder.

"I did," she replied simply, resheathing her blade and looking down at Kouki, who was looking down at the ground, making it impossible to read his expression. However, Shizuku was absolutely certain she'd cut through the Spirit Binding this time. All of the brainwashing Eri had inflicted on him was gone.

"Kouki. You should be free of the brainwashing now. You understand what it was you did, and what's actually going on here...right?" Shizuku said sternly.

"....."

In a slightly gentler voice, Ryutarou added, “Well, it’s over now, but you better reflect on what you did. Also, we’ve gotta catch back up to Nagumo and beat the shit out of that stupid god before his army kills everyone back on Tortus, so come back to us, Kouki.”

“.....”

For a while, Kouki said nothing. But then he started trembling, and in the faintest of whispers, he said, “No, this can’t be. This has to be some kind of mistake. *I’m* the one who’s in the right. Yeah, that’s it, I was just brainwashed. There’s no way I’d...try to hurt...Ryutarou...or Shizuku... It wasn’t supposed to be like this... I was just trying to do the right thing... I just wanted to be a hero...like my grandpa...that’s all... How did things end up like this...? I’ve lost everything... Nagumo took Kaori *and* Shizuku away from me...and now even Ryutarou’s on his side...”

“Kouki!”

“H-Hey, Kouki!”

Shizuku and Ryutarou shouted, worried that Kouki was about to spiral out of control again. Their expressions stiffened when they saw him claw at the ground hard enough to break his own nails, and they readied their weapons once more.

“Yeah...I’m not the bad guy here. This is all Nagumo’s fault. If it wasn’t for him, everything would have worked out perfectly. But because of him, Kaori, Shizuku, Ryutarou, Eri, and everyone else...betrayed me. You all betrayed me!”

Kouki looked up, his eyes—half-covered by his bangs—glowing with hate and indignation. But beneath that veneer of anger was a deep-rooted sorrow. Sorrow that stemmed from the guilt of knowing what he’d done, and that he could never turn back. His conscience weighed on him so heavily that he needed to find someone else to

blame, or he'd crumble under the despair. In a way, he looked like a child having a panic attack.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Though his mana should have been depleted, it flared up again as Kouki screamed, sending a spiral of pure-white energy rising toward the heavens. However—

“Kouki, stop! If you keep going, you’ll kill yourself!” Shizuku screamed.

“Wait, he’ll do what?! Shizuku, what’s going on?! I thought you cut off his mana?!”

“I did! I sliced clean through his mana repository! He’s not absorbing the nearby ether to produce more mana!”

“Then how’s he getting more?!”

“By converting something else! I don’t know if he’s using up his life force or his soul or what, but he’s transforming it all into mana! It’s probably something he can do because he can use Limit Break! Either way, this isn’t good!”

“Goddammit, Kouki, come back to your senses already!”

Indeed, Kouki was creating this mana by burning away his own life. Abilities that overturned the natural laws of the universe always came with a steep cost...and they were practically never worth the price.

Shizuku and Ryutarou covered their faces with their hands as the shockwaves created by Kouki’s mana washed over them, but they continued to desperately call out to him. Unfortunately, he was too far gone to hear anything. Their voices physically reached him, but his brain refused to process anything they said. Shizuku couldn’t even tell if he was trying to destroy the reality that didn’t conform to what he wanted or just destroy himself.

“I’m going to put an end to it all. Why did things end up like this? Shouldn’t we have overcome all the hardships in this world together? Kaori, Shizuku, Ryutarou, Eri, and Suzu should have all remained by my side,” Kouki muttered to himself. However, his empty, resigned voice echoed clearly through the battlefield.

“This isn’t what I wanted. If I’ve lost everything...and I can’t even get it back...then I’ll at least destroy it all with my own two hands!”

The nearby rubble was pulverized as Kouki’s mana multiplied in intensity. He was transforming it all into Divine Wrath. And as he did so, his mana went from an uncontrolled spiral to a concrete form. He wasn’t making a dragon this time, but a much larger, human-shaped giant. And once his giant petered out, so too would Kouki’s life.

“Like hell I’ll let you die here!” Ryutarou shouted, forcing himself forward through the gale-force winds created by Kouki’s Divine Wrath.

“Why do you think we came all this way?” Shizuku said, gritting her teeth and following after Ryutarou.

They hadn’t come here for revenge, or to punish Kouki for his sins. Whatever penance he needed to do, it could come later. That wasn’t why they’d overcome crushing despair and kicked logic to the curb. They were here for one thing, and one thing only: to give him a good punch to the face and bring him back with them.

“Shizuku, I’ll take care of the Divine Wrath. You get Kouki!” Ryutarou shouted.

“That Divine Wrath is a whole lot more dangerous than the dragon we faced before. Not even your strongest transformation will be enough. You’ll die trying to fight it.”

Ryutarou gave Shizuku a fearless grin and replied, “Heh, don’t worry about me. There’s no way I’m dying here. I can’t let Kouki kill me, so there’s no way I’m dying!”

"You idiot. What kind of logic is that? Well...I guess it's fine. Logic won't really help us here. That blockhead's throwing one last tantrum, so I guess I'll have to beat him up until he finally apologizes!" Shizuku said, flashing him a fearless grin.

"I'm counting on you!" Ryutarou shouted as he leaped forward, determined to bring his friend back to his senses no matter the cost. His body was exhausted from the repeated transformations, but he bounded forward with unbelievable speed.

"S-Stay away! Don't come near me!" Kouki shouted, pointing his sword at Ryutarou and shooting a blast of Divine Wrath at him.

A wall of destructive light filled Ryutarou's vision, blotting out everything else. Kouki's magic was indeed far more deadly than before. Even Ryutarou's wereogre form wouldn't be able to survive an attack of this magnitude. However—

"Come forth, my light-devouring tree of the abyss—Transformation - Treant!"

Ryutarou had one last trump card up his sleeve. His skin turned gnarled, rough, and brown, while his eyes began to glow a dark crimson. Right after his transformation into a half-tree was completed, the Divine Wrath hit him. It halted his advance, but it didn't vaporize him. He crossed his arms in front of his face to protect himself, withstanding the onslaught of obliterating light.

"I-Impossible..." Kouki muttered, his jaw dropping open. In the back of his head, he'd expected Shizuku and Ryutarou to dodge out of the way, so seeing Ryutarou take his attack head-on was quite a shock. All the more so because it didn't seem to be killing him.

"Uoooooooooooooh!"

In fact, Ryutarou was managing to slowly advance forward. Tough as a tree, he held fast against the torrent of white light. The treant transformation didn't have much in the way of physical defense, and

it was cripplingly weak to fire. Plus, it didn't boast much offensive power either. And worst of all, it was slow. In this form, Ryutarou couldn't go any faster than a regular human's fast walk.

Treant form was wholly unsuited to close combat. However, it did possess one extremely valuable property...the special magic Photoabsorption, which allowed the user to absorb any and all light magic and convert it into mana. Ryutarou had acquired this transformation solely to prove to Kouki that he would never turn his back on him, no matter what Kouki did. It was normally a useless form, but in this instance, it was the strongest trump card. Ryutarou kept his gaze fixed firmly on Kouki, even with the torrent of light whirling all around him.

I'm coming for you. Don't you dare run away.

The sheer force of Ryutarou's will caused Kouki to inadvertently stagger backward. Fear crept into his eyes. Ryutarou's determination was so dazzling that it made him starkly aware of how pathetic he was being.

"I... I told you to stay away! If you get any closer, I'll kill you for real, you hear me?! You might be my best friend, but I won't hold back!"

Ryutarou just laughed. The fact that Kouki had said "kill you for real" just proved to Ryutarou that he didn't really want to kill him at all. Indeed, despite how bright Kouki's Divine Wrath was, the glow of his sword was dim. It was like a physical manifestation of its owner's hesitation.

On the other hand, Ryutarou was covered in wounds. As Shizuku had stated, even this form of his couldn't fully withstand Kouki's assault. The light that made it through his special magic tore at Ryutarou's skin, opening new cuts and instantly vaporizing any blood that came out. But even so, he grinned fearlessly and kept pushing onward.

“A-Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Kouki let out a strangled scream, not even sure of what he was doing anymore...or why he was doing it.

The only thought that remained in his head was, *It wasn’t supposed to be like this.*

Brandishing the full extent of his power, he once again tried to deny the reality in front of him. With a roar, the giant rose to its feet. It curled its fingers into a fist and wound its arm back for a powerful punch. Then, spurred on by Kouki’s pained screams, the giant of light brought its fist down on Ryutarou like a meteorite. And as the fist hit the ground, the earth shook, cracks spreading out from the point of impact.

“A-Ah...” Kouki groaned softly. Somewhere in the corner of his mind, he knew that he’d just killed his best friend. His eyes grew glassy and unfocused, while his thoughts became scattered and incoherent. Just as Kouki was about to lose it completely, he heard Ryutarou’s voice.

“C’mom, bro. You look really pathetic right now, you know that?”

“Huh?” Kouki mumbled in confusion. He had thought he’d never hear that voice again. Looking down, he saw there was a small gap between the giant’s fist and the ground.

On second thought, Kouki realized it made no sense for the ground to have survived with just a few cracks. His super-dense Divine Wrath should have obliterated everything in its vicinity and made a huge hole. The fact that it hadn’t meant—

“R-Ryutarou? H-How in the world did you manage to stop that?”

Ryutarou was standing there, holding his fist back with just his arms. He grinned fearlessly as he looked over at Kouki. There was white smoke coming off of him, his bloody wounds were being cauterized by the heat, and his body was riddled with cracks, but he was still standing...and the determination in his gaze remained unwavering.

“You idiot... There’s no way an attack without any feeling behind it...could scratch me... Hey, Kouki. You can’t kill me, no matter how hard you try. Wanna...know why?”

“H-Huh?”

“Because right now...I’m invincible. Ever since I decided I was gonna bring my idiot friend back home, I’ve been invincible! That’s why you can’t kill me! Until I drag you back to where you belong, I won’t die!”

“Wh-Why are you...willing to...?” Kouki trailed off, overwhelmed by Ryutarou’s sheer presence.

Smiling, Ryutarou replied, “Isn’t that...obvious? I’m your best friend...and it’s a best friend’s job to beat their friend back to their senses when they’ve gone down the wrong path.”

“Best...friend?”

“That’s right. But, well...I guess this time around, I’ll let her take care of the most important job. It hurts to admit it, but...it doesn’t look like my fists will be able to reach you...so...”

“Huh?”

Kouki watched on, dumbfounded, as a black shadow streaked past Ryutarou. With her trademark ponytail fluttering in the wind, Shizuku dashed toward Kouki, her cold gaze fixed ever forward.

“True Strike!”

“Ah!”

An invisible slash once again robbed Kouki of his mana. The great giant made of Divine Wrath then slumped to one side and dispersed into mist.

Kouki watched as Ryutarou slumped to the ground, finally freed from his burden, then turned to Shizuku, who was still looking at him with her clear, obsidian eyes. He could tell from her expression that she

wasn't done with her attack yet, but he no longer had the strength left to move.

I suppose this is no worse than I deserve...

Surprisingly calm, Kouki closed his eyes and prepared to take Shizuku's blade, but then he heard her drop it and his eyes blinked open in surprise.

"Grit your teeth, you absolute moron!" Shizuku screamed in a voice loud enough to blow away Kouki's despair.

"Huh?! Gaaah!"

Something hit Kouki in the cheek hard enough to rattle his brain. His vision flickered and the last dregs of strength left his limbs. As he looked up at the sky, he realized he must have fallen to the ground.

A second later, a similarly powerful blow hit his other cheek. His head jerked to the other side with such force that he thought his neck might tear. Then, he felt another blow on his other cheek. His head pinballed back and forth as Shizuku pummeled him with slaps.

"This is for all the pain you caused me! And this is for pushing all your problems onto me! And this is for ruining all the opportunities I salvaged for you! And this is for all the times you ignored my lectures! There's a bunch more, but here's another just for good measure! Oh, and have one more!"

"Gah! Geh! Bwah! Ungh! Gak! Ack! Blagh! Bwuh! Gwaah!"

Shizuku showed absolutely no mercy as she slapped the ever-loving shit out of Kouki. She slapped him so hard that some of his teeth were knocked loose.

"Sh-Shizu, wai—"

"No way! I won't stop until you get on your knees and apologize! I've had it with you! Stop pouting and sulking like a spoiled brat every single time things don't go your way! Everyone else has had to put

up with your crap for far too long, you little shit! I'm tired of your excuses! If words won't get through to you, then maybe violence will! Prepare yourself!"

Shizuku's voice echoed clearly through the ruined streets of the abandoned city. She straddled Kouki and continued slapping him as she channeled Ryutarou's feelings for the next part of her lecture.

"This isn't the way it's supposed to be? No duh, you idiot! No one gets everything they want in life! We all have to grit our teeth and endure things we don't like from time to time! But you just turned your eyes away from reality and didn't even try to fight for the future you wanted! No wonder nothing went your way!"

"Sh-Shizu—Gah!"

"I said it before, and I'll say it again: you're just a spoiled brat. You keep pretending the things you don't want to happen aren't real and make excuses over and over in your head. And then, when you mess up, you pin the blame on others!"

Shizuku finally stopped slapping Kouki, but she wasn't done with him yet. She grabbed him by the collar and hoisted him up.

"It's all over? Think again! There's no way we'll let you kill yourself! You don't deserve the easy way out! We're taking you back with us, even if we have to drag you home! And we won't ever give up! If even this isn't enough to get through that thick skull of yours, then we'll beat you up some more!"

"Shizuku..."

Kouki could tell from the look in Shizuku's eyes that if he tried to give her any more excuses, she really would pummel him to within an inch of his life. His face was swollen and bloody, but he summoned the last reserves of his strength and asked in a groan, "Didn't you pick Nagumo...over me?"

"Yeah. The man I love is Hajime, not you. So what?"

"Then why haven't you abandoned me? I did so many horrible things to you, so why...?"

Kouki couldn't fathom why Shizuku still cared about him if Hajime was the one she loved. After all, he'd done horrible things to her and the rest of his friends, and even though he was the hero, he'd betrayed humanity when they needed him most. He didn't think he was at all worthy of being redeemed.

Upon seeing his expression, Shizuku's eyes softened just a little and she replied, "Isn't that obvious? You're my friend. We've been together since we were kids, and we even trained in the same dojo. You're practically family to me...and family never abandon each other. Though honestly, I really wish you weren't such an annoying younger brother."

It was because Kouki was like family to Shizuku that she could never abandon him. And it was precisely because she stuck by him no matter what stupid things he did that they were family.

Upon hearing that, Kouki felt as though everything had finally fallen into place. All of the things he'd cared so much about, saving the world, doing the right thing, helping those in need, being a hero...all of that suddenly felt insignificant. These two had gained such immense power and chased him all the way to the Sanctuary not for grand reasons like those, but simply because he was Shizuku's family and Ryutarou's best friend. Even though he'd betrayed them, even though they could have died on the way here, they'd come to stop his rampage. They'd done it for such a simple reason, but it felt far greater than it should have. At the very least, he knew he'd never gone to such lengths for his own ideals.

Tears spilled from Kouki's eyes. He finally realized just how pathetic he'd been...and *exactly* how much these two meant to him. After everything he'd done, they'd still risked their lives to come save him.

"I'm...sorry. I mean it...I... Oh, what have I done...?"

"There you go. That's the apology I was looking for, you moron."

After a few seconds, the happiness of knowing his two best friends still cared about him faded, replaced by pure guilt. He realized now how despicable his past actions had been, especially since he was someone who cared about doing the right thing. His sins were so great that they could only be atoned for with death.

But dying meant invalidating everything his friends had done to rescue him. Besides—

"Don't try to run away, Kouki. Live on...and fight. We won't forgive you for seeking redemption in any other way."

Death would be just another escape. No matter how painful it was, even if he lost his home, even if his former friends all cursed his name, Kouki needed to keep living. Only by moving forward while seeing reality for what it really was would he be able to truly atone for what he'd done.

Still crying, Kouki looked into Shizuku's unwavering eyes and bit his lip. He chose to engrave Shizuku's and Ryutarou's words into his heart and say farewell to the weak person he'd been until now.

"I...know I can't die. I have to live...and finish the fight I couldn't finish the first time. I have to win the fight against myself."

"That's right. Cry your heart out, but make sure to get back up after that. And if you mess up again, we can just beat you to a pulp a second time."

Kouki still felt ashamed of himself, but he was also a little happy that his friends cared that much about him.

Shizuku let go of his collar and he fell back to the ground. While he didn't have the strength to stand, he was at least able to force his body back into a sitting position. He then looked at Shizuku with swollen, red eyes and spoke in a firm voice, saying, "You won't have to beat me up again. I can change. I'll show you I can. At the very least, I'll become responsible enough that you stop treating me like a younger brother."

"Oh? Even if you graduate from being my little brother, I'm afraid you'll never get to be a love interest."

"Aw, did you *have* to say that? Do you really love Nagumo that much?"

"I do. I'm head over heels for him. It's a shame I can't keep him all to myself, but I can live with sharing him. At least I know a guy like him will be able to handle all of us at once."

"Are you *really* going to brag about how cool he is to me right now?" Kouki said with a bitter smile. While he didn't feel any less jealous than before, he wasn't letting his jealousy cloud his judgment anymore. He could accept Shizuku's decision for what it was. For whatever reason, she really did love Hajime. That was reality...and he had just sworn to face it properly.

No matter how many times reality beats me down, I'll keep getting back up.

As Kouki gathered his thoughts, he realized that was probably the difference between him and Hajime, Shizuku, and Ryutarou. It was also the reason why he'd been defeated.

Just then, Ryutarou crawled over to them and said, "Hey, you guys better not have forgotten about me."

He sounded rather annoyed. He'd dispelled his treant form, so he was back to normal old Ryutarou.

"Wow, I'm impressed you can still move after all those injuries, Ryutarou," Shizuku said.

"I had to eat the last of the CheatMates, but I'm good."

After replying to Shizuku, Ryutarou turned to Kouki. Kouki turned to him as well. It was because of him that Ryutarou was covered from head to toe in wounds, but Ryutarou had still kept on shouting that Kouki was his best friend. That determination was something Kouki swore to never forget.

After a few seconds of silence, he finally said, "Uh...sorry, Ryutarou."

He didn't bow his head, though. Instead, he kept his gaze fixed firmly on Ryutarou. Breaking eye contact would have been the same as averting his gaze from Ryutarou's honest reaction.

Ryutarou gazed quietly back at him for a few seconds. But eventually, he grinned and said, "S'all good."

There was no need for a long speech. Everything he needed to convey could be said with that simple sentence.

Kouki smiled a little, glad that their relationship could stay the same as before.

Unfortunately, just as everyone was starting to relax, they felt a chill run down their spines.

"What in the world..." Shizuku muttered, gripping the hilt of her katana. Ryutarou tried to get into a fighting stance as well, but he'd pushed himself too hard and couldn't even stand.



Looking up, Kouki muttered, “Eri...”

Not only had Eri’s limbs been crushed, but her entire body was twisted and warped in unnatural ways. Her gray wings flickered in and out of existence, and it looked like she might fall at any second. She was coated in her own blood from head to toe, and even her eyes were bloodshot. She stared blankly down at Kouki and the others, and Suzu showed up behind her a few seconds later.

Shizuku and Ryutarou glanced over at Suzu, and after confirming that she was safe, they turned their attention back to Eri.

Seemingly unaware that Suzu was right behind her, Eri said in a hoarse voice, “Why? Why do you all look so happy? Hey, Kouki-kun? Those guys are your enemies, remember? They’re traitors who stole the things that mattered most to you. Why are you talking to them like they’re your friends? Why?”

Though she was interrogating Kouki, Eri’s unfocused eyes didn’t seem to be looking at him at all. If anything, it felt like she was directing those questions at herself. With how her crushed limbs were swaying in the wind, she resembled a creepy marionette.

“Eri...I’m sorry, but I can’t fight Shizuku, Ryutarou, or Suzu any longer. I won’t. I know now that I’ve been fighting the wrong foe this whole time.”

Eri went eerily still upon hearing that.

“What was that?”

She cocked her head at such a steep angle that it looked like she’d snapped her neck. Her gaze flitted about wildly, her eyes gleaming madly.

“What was that? What was that? What was that? What was that?
What was that? What was that? What was that? What was that?

What was that? What was that? What was that? What was that?
What was that? What was that? What was that? What was that?
What was that? What was that? What was that?" she repeated in
the exact same tone over and over, like a broken record.

Shizuku and the others felt goosebumps rise on their arms. Neither Shizuku nor Ryutarou, nor even Suzu, could bring themselves to say anything. Eri's madness was just too much for them to handle.

"E-Eri, listen to me," Kouki said, breaking the silence. It was precisely because he'd been beaten back to his senses that he was the one who had to talk sense into her. "I realize now that I've been an ignorant idiot this whole time, but there is one thing even I understand. I must have done something to hurt you horribly in the past. I know it might be too late to make amends, but please hear me out."

There was a note of desperation in his voice, but he was speaking from the heart. Perhaps that was why Eri actually focused her gaze on him. She stared at him with cold, emotionless eyes. It was as if all the darkness in the world was concentrated in her pupils. However, Kouki didn't avert his gaze.

What should I say to her?

He didn't know what the right words were, but he knew that even if he couldn't find them, it would be wrong to look away. Even if it had been a twisted form of love, Eri had truly cared for him. And besides, he was the only one who knew that she'd been wracked with terrible nightmares night after night. He needed to know the true reasons behind Eri's actions. As the one who'd been the catalyst for her change, it was his responsibility to face that truth head-on. Thus, he looked up at her, trying to see the real Eri Nakamura for the very first time. And that forced Eri to realize that her dream had died.

All strength suddenly left Eri's body, and she gave Kouki the most authentic smile Suzu had ever seen her make. It was a resigned, sad smile, but a genuine one all the same.

"Liar," she said, that one word echoing through the ruined city.

A second later, a bright light burst forth from Eri's chest.

"W-Wait, Eri, that's—" Shizuku shouted in a panic, realizing exactly what Eri was about to do.

That light was exactly the same as the one that had come from the self-destructing magic item Meld Loggins had used inside the Great Orcus Labyrinth—Loyalty's Promise. Though of course, the glow coming from Eri was far greater than what had come from Loyalty's Promise. And so, the resulting explosion would be magnitudes more powerful. Shizuku's voice was swallowed by the light, as was whatever Ryutarou and Kouki tried to shout.

Silence fell over the battlefield as the light consumed all sound. Realizing there was nothing they could do, Shizuku, Ryutarou, and Kouki covered their faces with their arms. However, after a few seconds, they realized that there was still one thing moving within the light...and it was heading straight for them.

It was, of course, their trustworthy guardian. The barrier master who'd saved their lives more times than they could count, Suzu.

Brandishing her twin fans, Suzu faced the torrent of light head-on, Inaba perched reassuringly on her shoulder.

Shizuku's, Ryutarou's, and Kouki's voices couldn't reach Suzu, but they still prayed with all their might for her success. If nothing else, they wanted their feelings to reach her...and though Suzu wasn't looking at them, it felt like she nodded in response.

Then, the light swallowed her whole.

Looking around, Suzu realized she was in an unfamiliar white room. The light that had swallowed her up was nowhere to be found, and she couldn't tell how wide or how tall the room was.

Within this empty white expanse, there was only one other person.

"Eri..."

"Suzu..."

The two former friends blinked in surprise as they stared at each other. They were a short distance apart, and both appeared completely unhurt. On top of that, they were both in their school uniforms. It was as if they'd been transported back to the time before they'd been summoned. The only thing different was that Eri wasn't wearing her glasses.

It was obvious they were in no ordinary place, but for some reason, both of them felt quite calm.

After they stared at each other in silence for a while, Eri said, "What a weird place. This...isn't my life flashing before my eyes, I don't think. It's not a near-death experience either, since that explosion should have killed me."

Eri's voice wasn't filled with insanity or devoid of emotion. It was, in fact, quite normal. Her demeanor was a lot more casual than when they'd been fighting.

Encouraged by Eri's natural tone, Suzu said lightly, "I guess that means we're about to die too, then? Though I'm pretty sure I managed to protect everyone."

"Really? I was hoping to take you all with me."

"Too bad. I want to live. I want Shizuku, Kouki-kun, Ryutarou-kun...and you, Eri, to live."

Eri scoffed dismissively, saying, "Hmph! That's rich, coming from the girl who crushed me with her barrier."

"Ha ha ha... I guess I did do that," Suzu replied, grinning at Eri, who frowned in annoyance.

"It doesn't look like this place is going to last long, so I'll say this while I still can. Your personality really pisses me off, Suzu."

"Oh? Do you have any specific examples?"

"Sure do. I hate how you always laugh everything off. Even when people bad-mouth you behind your back, you just blow it off with a smile. Oh, and I hate how perverted you act sometimes. Plus, I hate how you spout cringe lines about wanting to be friends when I'm trying to kill you. There's a whole bunch of other stuff too, but the thing that pisses me off the most is how childish you act all the time."

Fuming internally, Suzu took a deep breath, then grinned menacingly at Eri and responded by saying, "I see. Well, at least I'm not as pathetic as you, Eri."

"Excuse me?"

"You're always trying to act aloof and cool. Plus, you also brush off anyone bad-mouthing you with a smile, except you're just gloomy and emo inside. Could you be any more obvious about the persona you're trying to build? You wear glasses, act shy, *and* you volunteered to be a library assistant? I mean, come on. Maybe I am childish, but at least I don't try to act all mature and deep. You're way more cringe than I'll ever be, especially with how you keep pretending like you're the heroine in some tragic romance. You should grow up for real instead of pretending to act like an adult."

Eri returned Suzu's menacing grin and said, "Really? I'm more cringe than you, even though you go around calling people 'Onee-sama' and lusting after them? Are you sure you aren't into girls? For a while now, I thought you might make a move on me, you weirdo."

"Ha ha ha, that's just a bit. Besides, I'm not the one who was so obsessed with her first love that she literally mind-controlled the dude to get him. It doesn't get any creepier than that."

"....."

"....."

"You wanna go?!" they both said in unison, then started hurling insults at each other. Their vocabulary was a lot more colorful than one would have guessed from their personalities. Had anyone else been present, they would have been shocked that the two of them knew so many curse words.

Eventually, the two of them ran out of insults. They then glared at each other, panting, as cracks suddenly began to appear in the white room.

"Hmph, looks like this world is finally ending," Eri said in a surprisingly calm voice.

"....."

Suzu didn't reply. Instead, she put her hands on her knees and looked down to hide her expression. She failed to hide the tears that fell to the ground, however.

"What're you crying for, idiot?" Eri said.

"Sh-Shut up. The one who calls someone an idiot is the real idiot."

Sobbing, Suzu roughly wiped away her tears, but more kept spilling from her eyes. She knew this was the end, for real.

"I said it before too, but you guys probably won't die. After all, you protected everyone. I'll be the only one...to die."

"E...ri?"

Not even bothering to keep wiping away her tears anymore, Suzu looked up. In response, Eri averted her gaze, frowning slightly.

"You knew that from the start, Suzu. Why're you crying now?"

"Because..." Suzu trailed off, finding herself at a complete loss for words. It had been a rhetorical question anyway, since Eri knew exactly why Suzu was crying.

"You really are an idiot. What's there to cry over? I'm a traitor, and a piece of shit to boot," Eri stated as the edges of the white room began crumbling away. Then, she absently watched the room collapse and added, "You should find someone better to be friends with. Someone actually worth protecting, instead of me."

"Eri, I—"

"No, seriously, quit being so clingy."

"Eri..."

The space between them crumbled away as well, leaving just the area directly under Eri's and Suzu's feet. Only words could cross that gap now, which was why Eri decided to at least speak whatever thoughts came to her mind in her final moments. Dropping all pretenses, she said, "If I'd met you on that bridge back then, maybe things would have turned out differently. Hah, I guess I'm the idiot now for thinking that."

"Eri, I... I'm glad we were best friends! Even if it wasn't a real friendship, I really did enjoy the time we spent together!"

The ground under Eri and Suzu crumbled away, and their bodies started crumbling from the feet up as well. As their legs turned to dust and were whisked away by the wind, Eri finally turned to look at Suzu. Her lips twitched up into a faint smile. Though it was barely visible, it was like the smile of relief a lost child made when they finally found their way home.

After that, Eri Nakamura said her final words to Suzu Taniguchi, the girl who had once been her best friend...and perhaps still was.

"Goodbye, Suzu. The time I spent with you was the only time in my life I ever felt even a little happy."

“——” Suzu’s final shout was swallowed up by the fading world, but the exasperated smile Eri gave her at the very end was all she needed to know her words had reached her friend.

Tears streamed down Suzu’s cheeks as she looked around. Everything around her except for the area directly behind her had been turned into a wasteland. Her pained sobs echoed through the remains of the ruined city. She sank into a sitting position and gazed up at the sky, her fans slipping from her limp fingers. They both had holes in them, and their ribs were bent out of place.

Shizuku and the others were completely unhurt, but none of them could think of anything to say to Suzu. They, of course, didn’t know what had happened between Suzu and Eri in that strange, timeless white space. Still, they could tell that Suzu was crying because her best friend was dead. That much was obvious just by looking at her. And so, for a while, they simply watched over Suzu as she cried her heart out.

Eventually, she finished sobbing, rubbed away her tears, and got to her feet. Her eyes were still puffy and red, but she was okay. She wouldn’t stop here. She would keep moving forward.

Suzu turned back to Shizuku and the others and said in as cheerful a voice as she could muster, “All right, Shizuku, Kouki-kun, Ryutarou-kun. Let’s get going!”

She flashed them a beaming smile, and while her smile had always cheered up her comrades in the past, there was an added layer of maturity to it now. It was far more captivating than the smiles she’d given people in Japan, or even when she’d tried to cheer everyone

up in the Great Orcus Labyrinth. Shizuku and Kouki stared at her in surprise, while Ryutarou blushed, utterly captivated.

Suzu hadn't managed to get through to Eri. She hadn't been able to bring her friend back. Shizuku and Ryutarou felt her pain, but after seeing her smile, they couldn't help but smile back. After all, it had been Suzu who had wanted to bring Eri back the most.

Kouki, on the other hand, bit his lip, his expression filled with regret and worry. He wanted to say something, but when he met Suzu's gaze, he swallowed his words. He didn't know how to describe what he saw in Suzu's eyes, but he knew he shouldn't speak. Suzu wasn't looking for words of comfort. That much he was sure of.

What happened with Eri was something Suzu had chosen to lock away in her heart for now. Forcing that lock open wasn't a good idea. And that didn't just go for Kouki either. Suzu didn't want to talk about Eri with anyone just yet.

Kouki clutched his chest and swore never to forget Eri. He made sure to carve the pain he was feeling now deep into his memory. He then turned back to Shizuku and Ryutarou, who both nodded at him.

"All right, let's go chase after Nagumo!" Ryutarou said in a bright voice.

"You say that, but the two of us can barely move right now..." Kouki replied with a shake of his head.

"Besides, wasn't the clock tower destroyed? I don't see any other portals out of this place, so where should we even go?" Shizuku asked.

"Come to think of it, I remember hearing that this wasn't the only ruin in this place. Apparently, cities from different eras of this same civilization are scattered around the area," Kouki said.

"Then let's go find one of those! I'm sure the Skyboards will help us make quick work of it!" Ryutarou said excitedly.

"That's a good idea, especially since we'll be able to heal up while we move," Suzu said, chiming in.

"Heh, not even gonna give us a few minutes to rest, huh? Well, guess I can't blame you."

Suzu pulled out her Skyboard and rose into the air, while Ryutarou grimaced and took out his own. He basically sat on it, the same way Kouki did, then wobbled up into the air. Shizuku followed suit, boarding her own Skyboard a lot more gracefully.

After making sure everyone was in the air, Suzu looked down one last time. She sorrowfully bit her lip, then muttered something the others couldn't catch. But while they didn't know exactly what she'd said, they were sure that was her final farewell to Eri.

Once she was done, Suzu smiled cheerfully again and shouted, "All right, guys, follow me!"

"You really never change, huh?"

"Ha ha, it's okay, being cheerful suits you!"

"I can't hold a candle to you, Suzu."

One outstretched hand had been taken, while the other hadn't. The party still hadn't fully sorted out their feelings on how things had transpired, but they steeled themselves all the same as they flew through the sky, looking ever forward.

Chapter IV: The White Dragon and the Silver Apostle

Dark clouds covered the sky, constant flashes of lightning illuminated the stormy sea, and a torrent of rain poured from the clouds.

“Blegh, this is the worst zone for sure,” Shea said in an annoyed voice as she advanced through the storm on her Skyboard.

Tio had erected a wind barrier to keep the rain off everyone, but that hadn’t changed how dreary the place felt. Honestly, Tio and Hajime weren’t very fond of it either.

“This is the fourth zone we have passed through. Is Ehit toying with us?” Tio asked with a frown.

“He might be. This is his domain, after all. He probably gets to choose where we get transported.”

After passing through the portal atop the clock tower, Hajime and the others had passed through three other zones. The first had been a dimension where the ground and the sky were flipped, and gravity was inconsistent. The objects inside that dimension had seemed to fall in all different directions. The second zone had been a museum of sorts. It had been an underground labyrinth with busts and statues at every corner. The statues were of humans, demons, beastmen, dwarves, and giants, as well as monsters and creatures Hajime had never seen before. The third zone had been a library. There was no sky or ground to speak of, just an endless expanse of white filled with bookshelves. The books were seemingly written in every language under the sun and bound in all sorts of unique ways.

“Is that why all the enemies we ran into were super annoying? Because he’s messing with us?” Shea asked, clapping her hands together in realization.

In the upside-down world, they'd been assailed by a flock of pyramid-shaped inorganic automatons that had been made of some unknown material. They'd been able to control gravity and had moved in a tight formation like fighter planes. Though in the end, Hajime had blown them all to bits with his Agni Orkans. In the museum world, they'd been attacked by the statues, as everyone had been expecting. Hajime had blown them all to bits too with his Agni Orkans. In the library, the books had cast magic at the party and summoned monsters. And so, Hajime had carried out the biggest book burning in history with his Agni Orkans.

"They did not manage to annoy us very much, though," Tio mused.

"The Agnis are just too good. Still, I wish we could do something to be useful..."

"I'd rather use up bullets than waste your strength on these small fry, especially since I think I might have made too much ammo," Hajime answered with a shrug of his shoulders, checking their bearing with his compass all the while.

The reason the party wasn't flying above the clouds was because there was another group of enemies waiting for them up there. They didn't seem to want to go into the storm, so it was easier to travel through it while using a barrier to keep the rain and lightning away. However, there were exceptions to everything.

After a few moments, Shea's bunny ears perked up, and a second later, Tio and Hajime looked up at the clouds. There was a shrill screech that sounded like nails on a chalkboard, and a massive pterosaur burst through the clouds. It folded its wings and dived toward the party.

Hajime pulled out his Agni Orkan to shoot it down, but before he could, Shea jumped into action.

"Not so fast!" she shouted, taking a handful of steel balls out of her Treasure Trove. She then twisted as far back as she could and hit them with a full swing from Villedrucken.

Compression synthesis had made those balls much, much denser than they appeared, and they flew up to the pterosaur at blistering speeds. Shea had basically launched a series of mini-cannonballs at the pterosaur using just the force of her hammer strike, and they all slammed into the poor reptile's stomach.

There was a sickening crunch, and the pterosaur let out a pained screech. The thing was forty meters long, and its wingspan two hundred and fifty meters wide, but those tiny marble-sized metal balls had still done a number on it. It swayed back and forth for a few seconds, then fell to the stormy sea below.

"Heh, I was faster this time!"

"Wait, that 'not so fast' was directed at me?"

"Look, I was getting tired of sitting back and watching you slaughter everything. I'm itching for a fight."

"What are you, a berserker?"

"Those CheatMates just made my blood boil so much that—"

"They definitely don't have that kind of side effect."

While Hajime and Shea bantered with each other, Tio looked down and fired a breath attack toward where the pterosaur had fallen. When it had hit the ocean, a bunch of sea monsters had swarmed around it to feed on its corpse, and one of them seemed to have decided to attack the party.

A giant, thirty-meter-long shark surged upward on a water tornado, but Tio's small, arm-sized breath beam pierced right through it, slicing the monster neatly in two. The two halves of the shark then fell back to the sea, its water tornado dispersing into mist.

As the remaining monsters fought over the corpse, Tio casually turned back to Hajime and said, “It does seem like a good idea to warm up before the big fight, wouldn’t you say?”

It did make sense for Shea and Tio to test out the new skills they’d managed to develop thanks to the stat-doubling the evolution magic necklaces and the CheatMates gave them.

“Though I do understand why you might wish to advance as quickly as possible,” Tio added.

“I’m not getting impatient or anything,” Hajime replied.

“Really? We’ve been getting funneled from dimension to dimension for quite some time. Surely you’ve considered the possibility that we may just be going in circles, Master.”

Hajime had said it himself; this was Ehit’s domain. If he could choose where each portal took the party, it stood to reason that he could keep them from ever reaching Yue. Moreover, Hajime had spent the time leading up to the invasion within the Hour Crystal. While in reality only three days had passed, Hajime had spent an entire month away from Yue. And, of course, he was the one who wanted her back more than anyone.

It wouldn’t have been surprising if he was starting to get a little frustrated that they were being led around in circles. However, it seemed Tio needn’t have worried.

“I’m glad that you’re worried about me, but I know we’re not going in circles.”

“You do?”

“Ehit isn’t interested in making rational or efficient decisions. All he cares about is having his fun,” Hajime stated. His voice was calm, without a hint of impatience. “If he didn’t want his enemies to reach

him, he could very well keep them trapped wandering these dimensions forever, but he won't do that."

"Because that wouldn't be interesting?"

"Yep. If he really wanted to stop us, he wouldn't have left portals for us in the first place."

"Yeah, I guess he could just leave us trapped in one of these places if he really wanted to," Shea said in a disgusted voice.

"I see. You bring up a good point," Tio replied with a faint smile.

Ehit's thought process was quite easy to understand. The fact that she hadn't been able to work that out made Tio realize that *she* was the one who'd been getting impatient. And so, she took a deep breath to clear her head.

"So, Master, the reason you're destroying his creations with such overwhelming force is to show him that you have no intention of playing his game? He he, I see you're holding quite the grudge."

"That's...actually kind of a cruel mental image. It's like Ehit keeps coming over with a board game going, 'Come on, let's play,' and Hajime-san just kicks it out of his hands each time."

Regardless of what kind of arena Ehit prepared for them, Hajime just blasted through all of the enemies and used his compass to find the shortest route to the next portal.

It didn't make for a very entertaining game. In fact, if Ehit was watching over their journey, he was probably getting pretty annoyed.

Had Hajime and the others played along, Ehit still would have gotten bored and shown up eventually, but this method was much faster. Besides, it wasn't in Hajime's nature to use passive strategies. He was a firm believer in offense being the best defense.

"That bastard wants to see me struggle as hard as I can before I lose hope and die. There's no way he won't come out to fight me personally. And if he can't enjoy watching my journey, then..."

"He'll come much sooner," Tio said, finishing his sentence.

"Makes sense. Yue-san, we're almost there..." Shea muttered, her gaze fixed forward, searching for light amid the dark, stormy sky. She was just as worried about Yue as Hajime was.

"Sheesh, first she was trapped in the abyss, then she got trapped by her past, and now she got trapped by some stupid god. Even though she's the strongest vampire mage ever, she sure ends up playing the damsel in distress a lot! Pathetic! Once we get her back, I'm gonna have to beat some grit into her!" Shea roared. Though she was worried, she chose to express her distress as anger instead.

"Heh, indeed. At the very least, I need to give her one good lecture," Tio replied.

"No, I think seeing you act serious for once will scar her for life, so please don't, Tio-san."

"How mean!"

Until now, Hajime had kept his expression serious, but upon hearing Shea and Tio joke around, he finally cracked a smile.

"Don't worry; this is Yue we're talking about. She's probably already come up with a few ways to get her body back and is just waiting for us before starting the party. So yeah, don't be too hard on her."

"Why are you only ever lenient with her? It pisses me off," Shea said, pouting.

"Everything seems to be ticking you off right now."

"That's because I'm raring to go!"

"Master, are you absolutely certain you didn't add anything strange to Shea's CheatMates?"

Hajime looked away from Shea—who was currently spinning Villedrucken in circles—and stared at his compass. He seemed to be purposely ignoring Tio's question, which only served to make Tio more worried. Before she could wring an answer out of Hajime, though, he raised his fist in the air, signaling for everyone to halt.

"We're being misled."

"How?" Tio asked. "Is the compass no longer functioning?"

"No, it's not that. I think..." Hajime trailed off and looked up at the sky, his expression grim. "I think this whole storm is a barrier. The kind that loops you back to the start when you reach the end."

The party had been getting steadily closer to the next portal, but now they were just as far away as they had been upon entering this dimension. That also explained why the monsters here—which were at least as strong as the monsters in the abyss, if not stronger—avoided the storm. They knew it wasn't normal.

"So what now?" Shea asked.

"If it's a barrier, then it has a core somewhere. We just have to find it."

Hajime looked back down at the compass, changing his desire from finding Yue to finding the source of this storm.

"Found it," Hajime said as he looked coldly down at the ocean below. "There's a big monster down there. It's the source of the storm."

"So a monster's making this...?" Shea muttered.

"It must be quite the powerful monster if it can create a space-altering storm of this magnitude."

Shea and Tio stared down at the ocean as well, while Hajime took ten metallic spheres out of his Treasure Trove, each one a meter in diameter. He didn't bother grabbing them, though, and instead let them fall into the ocean.

"Shea, Tio, get a bit closer to me, just in case."

Shea's and Tio's expressions stiffened, and they hurriedly flew over to where Hajime was. He took out a few of his Orestes and had them fly under everyone's Skyboards. Just as their portals activated, there was a huge explosion in the ocean.

A column of steaming water shot up from the explosion's origin, swaying a little in the storm's fierce winds. Thanks to the Orestes' spatial barriers, Hajime and the others were fine, but it felt like an underwater volcano had just erupted with the force of Mt. Vesuvius.

"Those spheres you dropped were bombs filled with tar from the abyss, weren't they?" Tio asked.

"They call that a steam-blast eruption, right?" Shea asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. Those bombs are strong enough to vaporize most monsters, but..."

It seemed this one had survived. Shea and Tio turned to Hajime in surprise, and a second later, a whirlpool began to form directly underneath them. The whirlpool was so massive and ferocious that its center dipped nearly to the ocean floor. And an absolutely massive creature was swimming around the outskirts of that whirlpool. It had to be at least a thousand meters long. Its torso was as wide as a battle submarine's length. Even from this distance, everyone could make out the creature's metallic black scales and large pointed dorsal fin.

A second later, it let out a long wail.

"Voooooooooooooon!"

The ocean exploded once more as it rose to the surface. It was so imposing that it made every living creature in the vicinity instinctively terrified of it. Water cascaded off its back in waterfalls, and the creature reared its head to let out another wail. It had a dragon's head, with dark-crimson draconic eyes, and a jaw full of wicked-sharp teeth, each the size of a man. Three hundred meters of its massive body were jutting out of the water. Each of its black scales was the size of Hajime's large shield, and red lines trailed across its body like veins. It looked strikingly similar to the leviathan that showed up in so many Earth myths.

Hajime and the others were still a good distance above it, but had they been sailing on a ship, it would have looked like a massive wall had suddenly appeared in front of them.

"This thing reminds me of the Devourer. Actually, I think it's even scarier than that thing," Shea said.

"A mythical beast from a time long past. I suppose since we encountered it in the Sanctuary, 'divine beast' would serve as a more apt moniker," Tio mused.

This monster was far stronger than any of the ones the party had faced so far. Perhaps the reason the monsters above avoided the area below the clouds was because they knew it was this monster's territory.

The divine beast fixed its crimson eyes on Hajime and the others.

"Hey, is it just me, or does it look kinda angry?" Shea asked.

"That's quite the understatement. Here it comes!" Tio shouted.

The divine beast opened its maw wide, compressing an unbelievable amount of seawater inside of its mouth.

"Doesn't matter what it is; I'm still not playing along."

Before the divine beast could finish readying its attack, Hajime pulled out another new weapon. Shea and Tio turned to see him cradling it under his right armpit, his left hand gripping the massive thing's handle, with dark crimson sparks running down its length.

This new weapon of Hajime's was so massive that it looked more like a portable cannon than a rifle or bazooka. Though it was shaped like Schlagen, his anti-materiel rifle, it was over twice its size. Moreover, four arms were sticking out of the back of the cannon with crimson mana platforms at their ends to brace it.

This was Hajime's railgun-enhanced sniper cannon—Schlagen Acht Acht. It fired 88-millimeter armor-piercing rounds and was accurate up to a distance of ten kilometers. This powerful railgun cannon was one of Hajime's favorite weapons.

A second after Hajime pulled his weapon out, the divine beast unleashed a hyper-compressed jet of water at the party. In response, Hajime pulled the trigger, and Schlagen Acht Acht fired with such force that the recoil made Shea and Tio stagger on their Skyboards.

Crimson and blue collided in midair, and in less than a second, the crimson streak cut right through the blue jet, dispersing it. Though the jet was powerful enough to pierce steel, it couldn't even divert the trajectory of Hajime's bullet, let alone slow it down. The bullet slammed into the divine beast's mouth, punched right through the back of its throat, and pulverized the scales on the back of its head as it exited from the other side.

The divine beast let out a howl of pain, any intimidating presence it might have had before completely gone now. It thrashed about in the ocean, a veritable river of blood spilling from its wound.

Shea and Tio stared warily at the Schlagen Acht Acht, which was still spitting crimson sparks. The cannon's power was far greater than anything they'd expected.

Hajime pulled the bolt back and the spent 88-millimeter cartridge popped out. He then pulled a new one out of his Treasure Trove and slotted it in. After that, he slid the bolt back into place, and significantly more sparks started running down the cannon's length as he charged the next shot.

There was a second boom as he pulled the trigger again, and his second shot slammed into the divine beast's torso. He would have gone for the head, but it was hard to get a good aim with the beast thrashing around so much.

Hajime's second shot pierced through the divine beast just like the first, proving that his bullets could tear through its scales from both outside and within. The beast meekly let out another howl and sank beneath the waves.

"I didn't get a chance to do anything again..." Shea said, hanging her head.

"Don't be so quick to decide that, Shea. The battle isn't over," Tio responded.

"Wow, that didn't kill it?"

Indeed, the divine beast was still moving around. In fact, it was sucking up a bunch of seawater to plug up the wounds in its mouth and torso.

"Can it keep healing itself as long as there's water?" Shea asked.

"In that case, destroying its mana crystal would be the fastest way to kill it, but...were you able to find one, Master?"

Hajime gave the divine beast an appraising look, then shook his head and replied, "No, I don't see a mana crystal anywhere. It's like the Devourer, I think. Its whole body is one big mana crystal."

"I suspected as much. It seems these ancient beasts were a completely different manner of creature than modern monsters. In which case, the next best plan would be to shoot its head, but..."

"It's thrashing around too much. How about Tio-san and I stop its movements so you can snipe it, Hajime-san?!" Shea asked excitedly. She was, of course, raring to go, but she let Hajime make the final call. However, Hajime wasn't even looking at her as he took something else out of his Treasure Trove and threw it into the ocean.

"Hajime-san? What did you just throw?"

"I was just thinking...I couldn't eat the Devourer, but this might make for a nice meal."

Shea and Tio stared at Hajime in surprise, but he simply licked his lips as he loaded a third round into Schlagen Acht Acht.

Oh, I get it now... Shea and Tio thought simultaneously.

The reason why Hajime had been appraising the divine beast with such intensity was because he was planning on eating it and absorbing its powers. Eating most normal monsters didn't give Hajime power-ups anymore. Extremely powerful ones like that pterosaur from earlier might power him up a little, but even they wouldn't give him enough of a boost for it to be worth his time. However, this divine beast was different. It could control the weather, manipulate space, and even regenerate itself.

"He looks pretty tasty, don't you think?" Hajime said, and this time it wasn't just Shea and Tio who were a little creeped out by Hajime's enthusiasm.

The divine beast had finished regenerating about seventy percent of its injuries and resurfaced, ready to vent its wrath on Hajime, but when it locked eyes with him, it shrank back. Never once in its very, *very* long life had anyone looked at it like it was a snack. While it didn't fully understand the subtleties of Hajime's gaze, it was still a

little scared. And in its fear, it showed a brief opening, prompting Hajime to fire once again with Schlagen Acht Acht. The bullet hit not the divine beast's head, but a specific part of its torso which it had protectively coiled its tail around.

Like before, the bullet smashed through its scales, but the divine beast had gotten accustomed to the pain and didn't scream or writhe around. In fact, it glared at Hajime and opened its maw to fire another water jet. Unfortunately, in its anger, it failed to notice the thing Hajime had thrown earlier had landed right in its open mouth.

It fired its water jet, but Hajime just redirected it back to the divine beast with his Orestes's portal. However, it seemed the divine beast's defense was stronger than its offense, and its own jet glanced off its scales without causing much damage.

During the exchange, the divine beast finished fully healing its injuries, and the water that had been swirling around it fell back into the ocean.

A second later, however, another part of the divine beast's torso exploded.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

It let out another roar, but this time flames shot out of its open mouth. This wasn't a new attack or some special magic it hadn't shown yet, though.

"Master, what did you do?"

"With huge sea monsters like this, the standard strategy is always to take them down from the inside, right? And so, I had my Arachnae burrow into its body through its open wounds."

Once they'd made it inside, he'd had them release massive quantities of burning tar from the Treasure Troves they each possessed. Those three-thousand-degree flames mixed with

seawater inside the divine beast's body, causing a steam explosion that left it writhing in pain again.

"Does it have any way of making sure absolutely no water gets into its body when it dives? If not, it can't go underwater anymore or I'll hit it with another steam explosion," Hajime explained.

"It won't be able to regenerate itself either. Not only that, but every new wound will be another opening for seawater to enter its body and harm it further," Tio added, watching as her prediction came true.

The explosions caused a chain reaction, with each new explosion creating another hole for more seawater to flood through.

Of course, while the divine beast was writhing in pain, Hajime continued firing away with his Schlagen Acht Acht to finish it off. It had somehow managed to avoid taking any headshots so far, but its body was still riddled with holes. And as it was trying to stay as far out of the water as possible, everyone could see gouts of flame pouring out of them.

"Man, that must be torture," Shea said, her ears twitching sympathetically.

"I was worried its first attack might have knocked the Arachnae off my bullet, but from the looks of it, they all made it inside safely."

"So you plan on boiling the creature alive? What a wonderful—I mean, frightening tactic," Tio said.

"It's too late to correct yourself. Does your depravity know no bounds? I can't believe you can even enjoy something like that," Hajime said as he shivered, a little scared of how excited Tio was about being burned from the inside out.

Just then, Shea let out a small gasp as she watched the divine beast raise its torso out of the water and bite deeply into it. It then shook

its head a little, ripped a huge chunk of flesh off, and spit it out with a water jet.

“That bastard’s eating itself to spit my Arachnae out.”

Of course, the tar remaining inside the divine beast was still regularly causing explosions...and it had taken enough damage to be nearly dead. Still, Hajime knew it wouldn’t go down that easily. After all, he remembered how persistent the Devourer had been.

“Tch, fine. Guess we’ll do it your way. Stop its movements, you two. We need to kill it while those explosions are still going! I’ll snipe it in the meantime.”

“Oh, so you *were* listening to my plan.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to eat it.”

Of course, they needed to kill it either way or they’d never be able to escape this storm. And if they had to kill it anyway, Hajime figured he may as well absorb its strength. He stared voraciously down at the divine beast, expecting it to be furious at how badly he’d humiliated it. But instead, it let out an almost cute squeal. Hajime, Shea, and Tio all stared in shock. It then swam backward, seemingly afraid of meeting Hajime’s gaze. It was acting like a human when they tried to slowly back away from a wild bear.

“Hey,” Hajime called out, and the divine beast twitched. For a moment, Hajime thought he must have imagined what he’d seen, but no, the divine beast really had twitched.

The divine beast seemed just as surprised by its actions as Hajime, and it timidly looked up to meet his gaze. It was then that it finally understood that the reason it was so afraid of that tiny creature was because he wasn’t staring at it with hate or hostility. No, that creature was looking at it like it was food. That small human wasn’t just an enemy; no, it was this divine beast’s *predator*. The divine beast was absolutely certain that if it kept fighting, it’d be eaten.

After all, it had already suffered grievous injuries without even managing to scratch its quarry.

For the first time in its life, the divine beast felt terror. It had stood at the top of the food chain for eons, and the realization that it was now prey broke it. It lost the will to fight upon coming to that startling conclusion.

With surprising alacrity, it turned tail and dived into the ocean in an attempt to flee.

Ignoring the pain of its various injuries, it focused solely on running away. There was nothing on its mind except survival now. Even Hajime was a little surprised by how quickly the divine beast was able to move when it put its heart into it.

“Hey, get back here, you stupid fish! I still need to grill you! Where’s your pride as a divine beast?!”

The divine beast turned back to look at Hajime. But when it saw his expression, it started trembling and resumed its flight. Any pride it might have had was eclipsed by its desire to live.

In truth, this divine beast was the very same one that a certain genius gravity mage had nearly killed centuries ago. Ehit had taken pity on it and brought it here to the Sanctuary to serve as the guard to one of his portals.

Twice now, the divine beast had been beaten by a creature much smaller than it, and this time it was even about to be eaten.

With a pathetic screech, the divine beast dived into the depths of the sea, determined never to leave its home again. It even dispelled its storm so that Hajime wouldn't chase after it.

“Goddammit, how can a monster that big move so fast?!” Hajime shouted. “That was the perfect chance to get another power-up!”

He stomped on his Skyboard, and Shea and Tio shook their heads in exasperation.

“Well, it was kind enough to dispel the storm for us at least,” Tio said.

“Yeah, we were able to get through the barrier quickly, which is nice. Look, the portal’s probably on that island over there, isn’t it?” Shea asked as she pointed at a large island that was about seven to eight kilometers away.

Hajime used vision-enhancing magic in conjunction with his Demon Eye to scout out the island, and as far as he could tell, it was perfectly flat and covered by a forest. Sighing, he shouldered his Schlagen Acht Acht and took out his compass with his free hand.

“Yep, the portal’s at the center of the island.”

“Hmm, it’s hard to say for sure because it’s so far away, but aren’t those huge monsters moving in the woods?” Shea muttered.

“They look like...monkeys? I see snakes and dragons and spiders as well. I believe there are twenty of them in total,” Tio added.

From the looks of it, Ehit had put his collection of giant monsters in this dimension. All of them were large enough to tower over the forest’s trees. Even at this distance, Hajime and the others could tell they were all close to the divine beast in strength. And with the storm gone, all the pterosaurs flying above were able to attack the party as well.

“Shea, Tio. You guys wanted a warm-up, right? Protect me from those birds for a minute; I need to get something ready.”

“Ah, Hajime-san, don’t tell me you’re going to...”

“That does seem wiser than fighting them in close quarters, I suppose.”

Shea and Tio shrugged their shoulders as the pterosaurs started to descend.

It was true that it might take time to fight all those monsters normally, since Hajime and the others didn't know what their powers were. In which case, blasting them all away with a long-ranged attack was a lot more efficient.

Hajime took aim with his Schlagen Acht Acht while Shea and Tio got ready to repel the army of descending pterosaurs. As he poured his mana into the cannon, two more support struts shot out of the bottom of the halfway point of the barrel in a reverse V-shape. Like the other support legs, they created platforms midair to brace themselves against.

He then looked through the scope, using evolution magic and his Demon Eye to analyze the exact distance to each monster and where their mana crystals were.

"I sure hope you guys can't deal with sniping attacks from miles away," Hajime muttered to himself, then took a deep breath.

Sparks ran down the barrel as he pulled the trigger, and there was a deafening boom as a crimson streak shot out and decapitated a dragon in the distance. Hajime had fired from an angle above the dragon, so as the bullet passed through it, it hit the ground hard enough to make a small crater and crush the nearby trees.

A second later, there was a dull clunk, and Hajime started loading the next round. The first shot caused quite a commotion among the remaining monsters, but before they could do anything, the second shot took another one of them out.

Hajime continued firing methodically, eliminating all of the monsters guarding the teleportation gate from seven kilometers away with shots that traveled too fast to see. Even if the monsters had been able to pinpoint where Hajime was firing from by following the

trajectory of the shots, he started using his Orestes to change up his firing angles to keep the monsters guessing.

In seconds, the forest was covered in blood and flesh.

"Mmm, I imagine Ehit isn't very happy right now," Tio said, turning to Shea.

"I bet he wanted people to taste despair when they found out there was a whole island of giant monsters after taking care of a single one. He'd probably enjoy watching someone struggle to get past them all to the portal," Shea replied.

Both of them were casually slaughtering pterosaurs by the dozen while they talked. At this rate, they were certain that something very different would be waiting for them beyond the next portal.

Exactly one minute later, Hajime butchered the final giant monster. The party made their way over to the island without meeting any other resistance, and they found a big white obelisk at its center.

"Ready?" Hajime asked, also sensing what Shea and Tio had. Something was different about this portal.

The three of them nodded, then stepped into the portal. The dimension on the other side was strange and needlessly grandiose, just like the previous ones. This one was dotted with numerous floating islands of various sizes. The smallest of the islands were barely a few dozen meters across, while the largest spanned hundreds of kilometers. Some had rivers that spilled over the island's edges into big waterfalls. Though the water dispersed into fine mist after a few thousand meters, those waterfalls were still impressive.

All of the islands seemed to be filled with greenery, though some were verdant plains while others were lush forests. There wasn't a single island that was just barren rock or desert, though.

A sea of clouds spread out below the islands, making it impossible to see where the ground was. And because of how fluffy the clouds were, and how much they wafted around in the wind, it looked as though the world was made of cotton candy.

Sunbeams poured through small gaps in the clouds, but Hajime couldn't see an actual sun anywhere in the sky.

It certainly was a fantastical setting, with floating islands, sunbeams without a sun, and a sea of clouds serving as the world's floor. Had he not known better, Hajime would have almost thought this was heaven. Though, of course, he had no time to appreciate the sights at the moment.

"Over there, on the biggest island," he said in a stony voice.

Shea and Tio, who'd been significantly more impressed than Hajime, smiled sheepishly at each other, then hurried to catch up to Hajime, who'd flown on ahead. As they got closer to their destination, they realized there was someone there. Someone quite powerful, in fact.

As expected, the fifth dimension they'd been sent to was different from the others. When they reached the island, they saw that it had several small streams, a heavily wooded mountain, and a lot of grassy plains. Moreover, the flora on this island was far more beautiful than the plant life on the others. However, there was a single, fifty-meter tall white obelisk in the center of the island that ruined the picturesque natural atmosphere. There was a huge magic circle at the obelisk's zenith, and sitting cross-legged atop that magic circle was a figure clad in white.

It was this figure that was radiating all the power that Hajime and the others had sensed. He had long white hair and pure-white wings growing out of his back. His skin had a white tinge to it too, and even his eyes seemed to glow white.

"I knew you'd come, Hajime Nagumo."

“You again?”

For all that this man looked like a god, Hajime knew he wasn’t. After all, he recognized that face. It belonged to Freid Bagwa, the Garland Empire’s grand general and an ancient magic user. He had been granted an extraordinary amount of power, to the point where he seemed more intimidating than even the apostles. Chances were he’d been fully apostleified as well. But judging by the aura he was radiating, he’d gained far more power from the transformation than Eri had.

Hajime stared dismissively at him, as one might a pebble on the side of the road, while Freid watched him expectantly. After a few seconds of silence, the two moved at the same time.

“You’re in the way. Die.”

“Cosmic Rift!”

Hajime drew Donner at the speed of light, while Freid opened up a portal without any incantation.

“Mmmmmmrgh!”

“Gak!”

A second later, Shea grunted in exertion, and Tio squawked like a chicken being strangled.

“Shea, you okay?” Hajime asked, keeping his pistol trained on Freid.

Thankfully, Shea replied immediately, saying, “Yep! That just surprised me.”

“Cough, cough... I’m grateful for the help, Shea, but couldn’t you have just pulled me by the arm instead of choking me?” Tio asked in a tearful voice as she rubbed the welt on her neck.

Freid had opened up a portal just as Hajime had fired, redirecting his shot at Tio. He’d done the same thing Yue had done back at the

kingdom's capital, when she'd turned his own attack against his countrymen. Fortunately, Shea had seen the attack coming thanks to her special magic, Future Sight, and she'd pulled Tio to safety by clotheslining her.

The fact that Freid could open portals as fast as Yue meant Hajime couldn't rely on ranged attacks to take him down.

In a pleased voice, Freid said, "Don't think I'm the same man I was before."

"Yeah, your hair's gone all white. Was it from stress?" Hajime asked, and Shea and Tio burst out laughing.

Freid didn't rise to the taunt, however. Glaring intently at Hajime, he said, "When Alvaheit-sama failed to return, I was certain. My lord mentioned that you might be able to make it into the Sanctuary, but I knew. I knew for sure you would find a way into the Sanctuary. Your tenacity knows no bounds."

"What, are you trying to claim you understand me or something?"

"Of course. How many times do you think I've suffered defeat at your hands now?"

Though it had mostly just been luck, Freid was one of the only people who'd fought Hajime multiple times and lived to tell the tale, which was why he'd been able to predict that Hajime would shoot him just then and had reacted in time.

"And? What's your point?"

If he says that's why I have no chance, then he really doesn't understand me at all.

Hajime didn't have time to waste on pointless conversation. And so, he glared coldly at Freid, who grinned a little.

"Oh, I just wanted to tell you something before your final moments."

“Then spit it out already.”

“Well, you see, as much as I’d like to murder you myself, my master has ordered me not to lay a hand on you.”

Hajime raised an eyebrow at him, and Freid turned to Shea and Tio.

“Leave those two behind and go on ahead to face him. Then despair as he smites you with the body of the girl you love.”

In other words, Freid would allow Hajime to go on without a fight, but not Shea and Tio.

“Hmph... I’m not interested in playing along with your shitty script. We’ll slaughter you and move forward together.”

Hajime grinned fearlessly, and his Treasure Trove began to glow. Like before, he was going to completely mess up Ehit’s plans before advancing forward. Readyng themselves for battle, Shea and Tio flanked Freid from either side.

Even if Freid could redirect attacks with his portals, he wouldn’t be able to handle a barrage of attacks from all directions at once.

Freid rose to his feet and spread his wings. With a single flap, he flew up into the air, pure-white feathers fluttering around him.

“You will die like a dog, unable to protect the women around you, the same way you couldn’t protect your beloved. That is your fate.”

“I haven’t failed to protect her yet. Don’t worry, both you and your shitty god are going down in round two,” Hajime retorted.

“Let’s see if your abilities match your confidence!”

The obelisk emitted a blinding flash of light. The light covered everything, making it impossible for Hajime and the others to see more than a few inches in front of them. But of course, they still knew exactly where Freid was. A mere flash-bang wasn’t even enough to slow them down.

Hajime prepared to charge, intent on taking Freid down before he could throw out an attack, but then Shea shouted, “There’s a Void Fissure coming!”

“Void Fissure,” Freid said a second later, and Hajime reflexively fired two shots with Donner and Schlag. Both pistols were loaded with Area Burst Bullets.

The two bullets crossed paths in the space between his allies and Freid, creating a spatial vibration to dampen his Void Fissure.

Of course, that wasn’t enough to eliminate the attack entirely, but the weakened Void Fissure wasn’t strong enough to break through Hajime’s and the others’ natural defenses either.

However, it did hurt enough to slow them down for an instant. And in that second, the light from the obelisk faded, and Hajime saw that they were surrounded by an army of two thousand monsters. He recognized most of them, but like Freid, they’d all been significantly powered up. The four-eyed wolves he’d seen before now had two extra heads, and their fur had turned white. The tentacled black cats had also turned white and grown to the size of leopards. The Ahatods and Absods that had given Kaori and the others so much trouble in the Great Orcus Labyrinth were also proportionally bigger, and the Absods had extra heads growing out of their tails.

From the looks of it, each of these monsters was as strong as the most dangerous of the abyss’s creatures, and they could all fly now. The gray dragons that Hajime and the others had faced off against in the Snow Fields were now each as strong as Uranos. Their scales were much more lustrous and, like most everything else, had turned a bit more white. They were more like off-white dragons now rather than gray ones.

And, of course, Freid Bagwa’s favorite familiar, Uranos, had also gotten a power boost. In fact, it felt like a completely different

creature from before now. It had tripled in size to be twenty meters long, had four wings, and its scales were the purest white. The biggest change, however, was that its body was constantly emitting white sparks. It looked like the white dragon god of legend that Tio had once told Hajime about. Not even the divine beast Leviathan was this strong.

Uranos flew over to Freid's side, moving with surprising dexterity considering its bulk.

Freid spread his arms out and said in a theatrical voice, "Go on, Hajime Nagumo. Leave your women to face this desperate situation alone!"

What an idiot... Shea and Tio thought simultaneously. There was no reason to do as Freid said. After all, working together was the safest way of taking Freid down.

However, to their surprise, Hajime neither retorted nor counterattacked.

"Hajime-san?!" Shea shouted.

"Curses! How could I have failed to notice what those pillars of light in a sunless world meant?!" Tio exclaimed.

Hajime had become trapped within a pillar of light that looked identical to the sunbeams the party had seen in the distance while coming here. In other words, all of those pillars were made by Ehit.

Remembering what had happened when Yue had been trapped in one, Shea and Tio looked at Hajime with worry in their eyes. It looked like they wanted to run over to him, but he gave them a small shake of his head. He'd already come up with countermeasures for this spell. His new prosthetic arm had a miniature pile bunker tucked away in the elbow.

Hajime drew his arm back, crimson sparks shooting out of the shoulder section. Lines of red mana coursed through the metallic arm like veins.

However, just before he shattered the pillar, Freid said, “That light is a simple teleporter. It’ll take you to your beloved vampire princess.”

Hajime hesitated. It was true that he didn’t sense anything dangerous from the light, and that it seemed to be connecting him to yet another dimension.

“I see. Well, too bad. Ehit can wait a bit longer,” Hajime said with an arrogant smirk.

Freid’s expression stiffened, but Hajime didn’t care. He reared his arm back again, but this time Shea and Tio stopped him.

“Hajime-san, you should go on ahead.”

“Yes. We can handle this. You may as well take advantage of Ehit’s invitation.”

Hajime raised an eyebrow in surprise, but before he could say anything, Shea added, “We’ll hold them back! You go on without us! Man, I always wanted to say that line at least once.”

“How does the continuation go?” Tio asked with a smile. “Oh yes, ‘Don’t worry; we’ll be right behind you.’ He he he he...”

Shea gave Hajime a reassuring wink, and he just shook his head in exasperation.

She’s raising all those death flags on purpose, isn’t she?

But of course, even if Shea’s and Tio’s tones were joking, Hajime could tell from the looks in their eyes that they were serious. There was no telling what Ehit might do if Hajime refused this invitation, and on the flip side, this was the perfect opportunity to reach Yue right away. Shea and Tio didn’t want to let this chance slip past them,

and they were confident that they could easily take care of Freid, and that Hajime would be able to get Yue back even if he was alone.

After thinking about all that, Hajime decided to accept their resolve. His body started to turn transparent as the pillar's glow brightened.

"Shea, Tio."

"Yeah?" Shea asked.

"Mmm?" Tio mumbled.

It was clear from the look in his eyes that he had absolute faith in the two of them.

"Don't hold anything back. Crush this idiot with all your strength. I'm gonna do the same to Ehit."

"Aye aye, sir!"

"He he, you can count on us!"

They smiled fearlessly back at him. And a second later, the pillar shot up to the heavens, taking Hajime's body with it.

Shea and Tio watched him leave, then put away their Skyboards. Shea activated Aerodynamic to stay in the sky, while Tio unfurled her dragon wings. Shea then tapped Villedrucken against her shoulder, her bunny ears standing straight up.

"You said some crap about slaughtering us, but you're the one who's going down."

Tio cracked her neck, smiling sadistically, and added, "You foolish man. We've thoroughly trounced you every single time we fought, and this shall be no different."

They were surrounded by two thousand of the strongest monsters to have ever been created, but they still had absolute confidence in their victory.

Freid narrowed his eyes at them and replied, “Struggle long and hard for me. It’d be a shame if you died before Hajime Nagumo, after all. I want him to hear your screams for as long as possible. That’s the only thing you worthless insects can do to entertain my master.”

“Yeah, right. Hey, I’m feeling nice, so I’ll let you choose how you die. Do you wanna be squashed, choked, beaten to a pulp, or just blown up?”

“You should not boast about what you cannot do. It’s time you learned your place.”

Shea and Tio glared at Freid, who stared coldly back at them.

After a tense pause—

“Die!”

“Go to hell!”

“You’re mine!”

All three of them leaped into action, ready for the most intense battle of their lives.

Chapter V: Ragnarok

All of Freid's monsters attacked Shea and Tio at the same time. His gray dragons unleashed a torrent of aurora breath attacks from above, his three-headed wolves fired gouts of flame from behind, and the Ahatods fired blasts of mana shockwaves from either side. And of course, in front of the duo was Freid. He fired a meteor storm of disintegration feathers at them.

However, Shea and Tio looked completely unfazed by the flood of attacks rushing in from all sides. Shea summoned a red, three-meter-wide sphere above her head, then pulled Villedrucken back for a heavy swing.

“Take thiiiiis!”

She hit the sphere as it fell, sending it flying like a cannonball. The ball was made of super-compressed azantium and had an outer coating of sealstone, making it quite a force to be reckoned with, especially when it was flying so quickly.

The red sphere smashed through one side of the mana shockwaves and ripped straight through the Ahatods behind it. Shea then safely stepped through the hole she made, dodging all the remaining attacks.

Tio launched her own counterattack at the same time.

“Such lukewarm flames,” she mumbled, diving right into the sea of fire. The flames licked at her skin, but she just covered her eyes with her sleeve and pushed forward. Black dragonmen were known for their sturdiness, and they were masters of fire and wind magic. Even in her human form, Tio was practically fireproof, especially with her now-buffed stats. On top of that, she was wearing the chain mail-like kimono Hajime had made for her, which was woven together with reinforced black dragon scales.

Tio emerged on the other side of the flames completely unscathed, then spread her hand out in front of her. Five black rays shot out of her fingers, burning through everything they touched. She'd compressed her breath and fired it like a laser, and with just a flick of her fingers, she could redirect any of the rays to slice through a new target. This was one of her new techniques—Dragon Claw.

Just then, she saw an image in her head of moving two steps to the right, dropping down a little, then taking three steps forward.

"Mhm, thanks," she said, following the image's movements exactly. A blast of aurora breath passed by her left as she went right. Then, as she fell, a writhing mass of tentacles passed over her head, and as she stepped forward, a beam of pure-white light grazed her back.

Meanwhile, Shea had grabbed hold of the chain connecting her sphere to Villedrucken and was spinning it around like a flail as she danced across the battlefield. She dodged every single attack Freid's monsters threw at her, while each swing of her sphere obliterated another enemy.

Freid was, of course, bombarding her with disintegration feathers, but none of them even came close to hitting her.

This was all thanks to her new Future Sight derivative skill, Prophetic Visions. It allowed her to see a few seconds into the future whenever she wanted. She was currently using it to predict the trajectory of attacks aimed at her to move to a safe spot ahead of time.

Moreover, she had one of Hajime's upgraded telepathy stones that let her communicate via images as well as voice.

Of course, with how dense the barrage of attacks was, more often than not there wasn't any safe place. When that happened she simply blasted through some of the attacks to open up new paths.

"Weak," Freid stated in a voice too quiet to be heard, but Shea still saw what he was about to do thanks to her Prophetic Visions.

“Tio-san, he’s opening a portal!” she shouted, forgetting for a moment that she could just use telepathy.

A second later, aurora light flooded toward Tio from all sides. All of the aurora breath attacks the gray dragons had fired from above had been transported via Freid’s Cosmic Rift to surround Tio. There was no possible way to dodge, and a second later, Tio was buried beneath the wave of auroras.

“You really are tough...” Freid muttered.

“Ngh, I felt that one. Still, that was nothing compared to the pain Master blesses me with.”

The auroras faded away, revealing a transformed Tio. Her skin was now covered with black scales, her glowing golden eyes the only spots of color on an otherwise jet-black body. She looked like a human-shaped dragon.

This was Tio’s new metamorphosis magic, full-scale humanoid transformation. She maintained her human form while transforming into a dragon, coating herself with scales and bolstering their sturdiness with defensive magic.

There was white smoke coming off her body, so it looked like the aurora attacks had done a little bit of damage, but not enough to really hurt Tio. Hajime had been nearly killed from just one of those aurora attacks in the past, so it said a lot about Tio’s defensive capabilities that she could take a full barrage and come out no worse for wear.

“Now it’s my turn!” Tio exclaimed, bending backward all the while.

Thinking that Tio was about to attack his dragons, Freid opened a portal to absorb her breath attack and send it back at her. Unfortunately, he’d read her wrong.

Tio's chest expanded as she sucked in a massive breath and roared, "Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

She then let out a powerful roar that was just as mighty as any breath attack. Her roar was laced with the spirit magic Soul Shock, which landed a direct blow to the target's soul, rendering them unconscious. By mixing the spell with physical sound, Tio had turned the attack into one that hit both the soul and body simultaneously. There was nothing a portal could do to stop that attack.

Waves of black mana rolled over the gray dragons in the sky, and they all started spasming. Then, a second later, their eyes rolled up into their heads and they began to fall.

Tio had dubbed her roar and Soul Shock combo Draconic Pulse. The effects of her roar were felt not just by the gray dragons above her, but also by the three-headed wolves to her sides. While they hadn't been knocked out, since they hadn't taken a direct hit, they were still trembling in fear.

Tio, of course, took advantage of that and stretched her hands out to either side, firing two spiraling breath attacks. The whirlpool of black breath could travel for hundreds of meters before petering out of strength, but she didn't even wait for it to travel that far before making her next move. She twirled around, her sleeves fluttering elegantly in the wind, her lustrous black hair trailing behind her. But while she looked as dainty as a traditional Japanese dancer, her attacks were anything but. Her breath attack fanned out in a circle, slicing through hundreds of monsters in seconds.

"Tch!" Freid clicked his tongue and deployed a spatial barrier to keep Tio's breath from slicing him apart as well. "Uranos, it's time to pay them back for humiliating us!"

Uranos's eyes lit up immediately, and he tried to pull the same trick Tio had. He threw his head back and sucked in a huge amount of air before letting out a thunderous roar.

“Gruoooooooooooh!”

He clearly didn't like being one-upped by Tio. However, his roar had no spirit magic enhancing it. Instead, it was laced with spatial magic. Freid had powered his pet dragon up enough that it could use a little ancient magic.

Spatial shockwaves rippled across the battlefield, annihilating any monsters that were unlucky enough to be caught in the blast radius, including the extremely sturdy Absods. Even the ones slightly outside the attack's effective range ended up bleeding out of their eyes and ears as they lost consciousness and fell to the ground. The few remaining gray dragons retreated to a safe distance and bowed their heads, as if showing deference to their king.

Uranos could kill things just by roaring, so it was hardly surprising that other creatures knelt before him. He had, in fact, stayed out of the initial assault because his attacks were so powerful that they killed his allies as well, so Freid had waited until his monsters had been thinned out before bringing Uranos to bear.

“Nuwooooh!” Tio shouted.

“Fungyaaah! M-My ears!”

Tio had been a lot closer to Uranos, so the shockwave had sent her flying, while Shea's sensitive ears had been damaged by the loudness of the roar, causing her to stumble a bit. And because of that, she wasn't able to tell Tio what was about to happen next.

Tio hurtled toward the ground, hitting it with such force that she created a small crater where she landed and kicked up a dust cloud so large it obscured her entirely.

Not giving her even a moment to rest, Uranos gathered a bunch of white lightning sparks inside his mouth and fired a pure blast of energy at Tio. There was a high-pitched whine as his divine dragon god's breath headed straight toward the ground. The breath attack was powerful enough to obliterate a small island by itself. And yet, as the lightning hit the island, there wasn't much of a shockwave. The reason for that was because the island wasn't sturdy enough to withstand the blast at all. Before shockwaves could spread from the point of impact, the lightning breath passed right through it, boring through the island's bottom and opening a hole in the sea of clouds below.

Uranos's attacks really did look like god's divine judgment. They were powerful enough to obliterate anything and everything in their path.

The dust cloud eventually faded away, revealing an empty hole where Tio had been.

"Tio-san!" Shea shouted in despair. She tried to contact Tio via telepathy as well but got no response.

"Whoops. I didn't think one attack would kill her. I was hoping to torture her more first."

Freid looked down at the hole, seeming mildly dissatisfied.

Enraged, Shea turned to him, switched Villedrucken into bombardment mode, and exclaimed, "She won't go down that—!"

But before she could fire at Freid, she felt a chill run down her spine. A vision of her own death flashed in her mind, and she hurriedly dived to the side.

A second later, the space where Shea had been twisted, and a huge claymore thrust through the spatial distortion. Experience told Shea that a follow-up attack was coming, and she realized she wouldn't be able to dodge it completely.

“You little—”

Determined to at least avoid a fatal blow, she cartwheeled through the air. Four more swords came out of nowhere, grazing her arms and legs.

Blood sprayed through the air, but Shea couldn’t afford to stop or she’d be killed. She whipped her head to the side, avoiding another thrust aiming for the back of her skull. The thrust still grazed her cheek, but it wasn’t a serious injury. A diagonal slash came at her from above, which she blocked with Villedrucken while blocking a second horizontal slash with her sphere’s chain. Yet another two slashes came up at her from below, which she blocked with her boots. Using the force of the impact to backflip away, Shea pulled Villedrucken’s trigger and used the shockwave blast to propel herself sideways while backflipping.

Three more swords went for where her head, chest, and stomach had been, but she’d fortunately escaped in time. The swords still grazed her shoulder and thigh, but with that, Shea was finally out of the encirclement. Making footholds for herself with Aerodynamic, she came to a halt to see what she was up against.

Unfortunately, it seemed her enemies weren’t even willing to give her a second to catch her breath. An apostle stepped out of the spatial distortion, her silver hair and wings fluttering in the wind, and swung down at Shea with her claymores.

“Nnnnnngh!”

Shea blocked them with Villedrucken’s handle, surprised at how much force was behind the blows. Her footholds were crushed by the impact, so Shea and the apostle fell to the ground as their weapons clashed. Sparks flew through the air as metal scraped against metal, and as they hit the ground, this strange silver apostle opened her mouth.

“I am the first apostle, Hearst. The executioner of Ehit’s enemies.”

Her claymore started to glow platinum, and her mana swirled around her. The amount of pressure she was exerting was completely different from that of any of the apostles Shea had seen thus far. This one was something new.

Hearst swung her claymore, sending Shea flying.

“Waaah!”

Shea hadn’t been batted around this easily in a very long time. She hit the ground hard, right next to where Tio had fallen mere moments ago. She coughed violently as a dust cloud swirled around her.

“I am the second apostle, Zweit. The executioner of Ehit’s enemies.”

“I am the third apostle, Dritter. The executioner of Ehit’s enemies.”

“I am the fourth apostle, Vierte. The executioner of Ehit’s enemies.”

“I am the fifth apostle, Funfte. The executioner of Ehit’s enemies.”

Shea heard four new apostles name themselves, but her focus was on the visions of death she kept seeing.

“Mmm, you all really want me dead, huh?” Shea said as she tried to dodge out of the way.

Unfortunately for her, the apostles were faster. Five silver flashes shot toward Shea, and she had to bring up Villedrucken to block. The head of the hammer expanded to cover her entire body, allowing her to shield herself from the disintegration beams. However, she wasn’t sure her weapon would be able to withstand this much punishment. She debated using one of her trump cards, but before she could come to a decision, a pleasant voice reached her ears.

“That’s quite enough out of you lot.”

A series of black streaks shot up toward the apostles from below, and a black whip coiled around Shea, dragging her safely out of the crater.

The apostles blocked the attacks with their wings, but the impact pushed them back just enough to foul their aim. Shea took that opportunity to leap even farther away, which was good because a second later, the spot she'd been standing in was demolished by disintegration beams.

These five apostles were clearly on a different level from the others. Other apostles might have been able to launch attacks just as powerful, but it would have taken them far longer to charge them.

"Shea, are you all right?"

"Yeah, but what about you, Tio?!"

Tio uncoiled her whip as Shea jumped up to where she was hovering.

Indeed, Tio looked to be in far worse shape than Shea. Her left sleeve was torn and blood was trickling down her arm. Other parts of her body had been damaged enough that her scales had been torn off, revealing red skin underneath.

"Fret not, Shea. These wounds are little more than scratches."

"They're definitely not just scratches, but..."

Tio's voice was steady, and she didn't look at all that pale. Plus, the smile she gave Shea as she chugged a potion didn't seem forced either. Despite how injured she looked, Tio really did seem fine.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Shea took out a CheatMate. She bit into it, keeping a wary eye on the apostles. But then, she heard a dismissive snort from the other side.

"So you escaped, eh? In a way, that's fortuitous for me, but it still pisses me off that you're as tenacious as your man," Freid spat, glaring at Tio.

Uranos was glaring at her as well, looking just as annoyed as his master.

Tio finished her potion, spat out the empty vial, shrugged her shoulders, and replied, “For a moment, I really was worried I might die back there. You’ve grown a lot stronger since we last met.”

“Stop trying to act tough. I know how badly that attack hurt you.”

“I’m not putting on an act, though?”

“I’m not the only one who has received Lord Ehit’s blessing. Uranos has evolved beyond mortal limits as well. He’s become a god in his own right. Not only is his breath much stronger, but it also inhibits healing. Surely you’ve noticed your restoration magic isn’t working as well as it should?”

“Mmm, yes, I have.”

Tio had indeed tried to use restoration magic earlier, but she’d quickly noticed it was considerably less effective than it should have been. Had Kaori been here, she probably would have been able to overcome Uranos’s healing debuff with ease, but Tio didn’t have nearly as much aptitude for restoration magic as she did.

Freid grinned wickedly and continued, “Well, it doesn’t just stop your healing either. Your wounds will grow worse with time. They already hurt like a bitch, don’t they? But before long, your entire body will be wracked with so much pain that you’ll die.”

Freid was quite happy that he’d be able to enact his original plan of slowly torturing Tio to death.

“Sorry to rain on your parade, but these wounds don’t hurt at all. I highly doubt they’ll kill me.”

“Don’t bother bluffing, I can—wait, what?”

Freid’s smile vanished, replaced first by confusion, then surprise. Tio’s wounds were closing up before his eyes.

“How can this be?! Urano’s breath can hamper even restoration magic! This shouldn’t be possible!”

“Fool. If you can dispel the healing debuff, then even regular healing magic will work just fine.”

The way restoration magic actually healed was by interfering with time and rolling back a person or object to an earlier state. Thus, Urano’s breath hampered healing by rendering any mana used on the wounds inert.

“How many times do you think Master has been hit by your pet dragon’s breath? Did you really think he wouldn’t come up with countermeasures for it?”

“Wait, so that potion you drank earlier wasn’t a healing potion?!”

“A brilliant deduction.”

Tio had downed a CheatMate - Drink Version which had been specifically designed to counteract Urano’s breath. Anytime someone who hadn’t cleared the Great Orcus Labyrinth approached Oscar’s home, the hydra appeared to serve as their final trial. If someone who had cleared the labyrinth was with them when the hydra appeared, they had the authority to stop it, which meant they could analyze it, and its silver head’s healing-impairing aurora breath if they wanted.

During his analysis, Hajime had discovered that the silver head’s fangs contained an antidote for its own breath, to make sure it couldn’t be hurt by it in the same way. He then extracted the antidote from those fangs and mixed it with metal powder imbued with healing magic to create a potion that was at once a healing potion and cured the aurora breath’s debuff.

The reason Tio had survived taking Urano’s breath head-on was because her scales had been coated in that same antidote. Given a few seconds, she’d easily been able to escape out from under it by

firing her own breath sideways and using the recoil to launch her away. However, Uranos's breath had been more powerful than she'd anticipated, and in those few seconds, she'd lost most of the left side of her body. The fact that Uranos's breath hampered restoration magic was still a slight threat, however, but not anything Tio couldn't handle.

Freid grimaced and Uranos growled, but the apostles seemed to be tiring of this conversation, so they fired another round of disintegration beams at Shea and Tio.

The two of them dodged to either side while Hearst went over to Freid.

"Freid-sama. Those two are still the Irregular's comrades. Do not let your guard down."

"I know."

It came as a bit of a surprise to Shea and Tio that the apostles deferred to Freid and not the other way around. But in a way, it also proved that they were nothing more than puppets. If an actual *person* was given the same status as them, they would automatically defer to that person.

Freid and Hearst turned back to Shea and Tio.

"For Lord Ehit!" they said in unison, brandishing their weapons.

With five extremely strong apostles to contend with as well, Shea and Tio were in a pretty desperate situation. And yet, both of them were grinning fearlessly.

"Looks like the real fight starts now!" Shea exclaimed.

"I suppose it's finally time to unveil our trump cards."

The reason Shea had held off on using her trump card was because strengthening herself past her current level gradually broke down her body, so she'd only be able to keep it up for a short time. On the

other hand, the reason Tio had held off on using her trump card was because it was far less effective when she was surrounded. Now, however, the two sides were facing off against each other.

“Let’s go! Body Strengthening Level IV!”

“Come, my loyal familiars—Dragon Army!”

Shea and Tio each played the first of their trump cards. The pale-blue aura of mana surrounding Shea grew brighter as she pushed her body strengthening even further. With Tio, the small red jewel on her belt began to glow, and a second later, a hundred black dragons appeared around her, each and every one of them armed to the teeth with artifacts.

In response, the apostles brandished their claymores, and Freid raised his hand into the air. His army of monsters let out a deafening roar, and sparks flew off of Uranos’s body as he readied to strike.

Both sides’ dragon armies launched their breath attacks, signaling the start of round two.

Black beams and aurora beams filled the sky, making the battle look more like a sci-fi showdown between spaceships than a war between dragons. Five streaks of silver light and a single streak of pale-blue light weaved their way between the breath attacks, clashing at regular intervals. Occasionally, the aurora and black beams would collide, causing gray shockwaves to radiate outward.

“Hiyaaaaah!”

Shea whirled her ball and chain around, then threw it at the five apostles. It looked like her attack was about to connect, but then the five of them vanished.

They were moving so fast that even with her body strengthening, Shea couldn’t see them. It was like they were teleporting. They didn’t

even leave afterimages in their wake. Just as Shea registered their disappearance, Hearst appeared right in front of her.

"Take this! Haaah!" Shea shouted, swinging Villedrucken at Hearst.

"Is this the best you can do?" Hearst asked, countering with a diagonal slash from one of her claymores. The two weapons clashed with a resounding clang, and it was the claymore that won out. Shea's hammer was knocked aside, and Hearst launched a horizontal slash with her second claymore.

At the edge of her vision, Shea saw Uranos fire his breath at Tio, with two apostles charging along with the breath attack, completely ignoring Shea. The remaining two apostles were flanking Shea from either side. Zweit and Vierte were fully locking down Shea's movements so she couldn't escape from Hearst. Furthermore, they followed up her attack with horizontal slashes of their own.

Hello? Level IV is already supposed to be strengthening me past all mortal limits, but it's still not enough?!

Shea's eyes simply couldn't keep up with the speed of the apostles' attacks. However, her Future Sight could. Screaming, Shea pulled Villedrucken's trigger, using the recoil to propel herself forward. The claymore still grazed her side, but she managed to avoid being bisected. She'd gotten so close to Hearst that the apostle couldn't freely swing her claymores. Of course, the two swings from Zweit and Vierte missed completely.

As a hammer user, Shea intimately knew the weaknesses of large weapons. However, it still took a lot of courage to charge forward *into* a lethal attack to avoid it.

As she charged forward, Shea hit Hearst with a headbutt. There was an almost metallic clang as their foreheads collided, and Hearst's head was knocked backward. And yet, Hearst's expression didn't change in the slightest. She kept her gaze firmly trained on Shea.

Shit, that didn't work! Shea thought, hastily leaping away. But as she did so, Zweit and Vierte slashed at her from below. Shea somersaulted over them, lamenting how outmatched she was in both power and speed.

Shea's Body Strengthening Level IV was slightly different from her regular body strengthening. Normally, she used her Mana Manipulation ability in conjunction with Conversion Efficiency II to raise her stats by two for every point of mana she used. But recently, Hajime had made a new artifact for her that upgraded her Conversion Efficiency to III so she could raise all of her stats by three for each point of mana she put into it.

Still, she'd known that wouldn't be enough when fighting Ehit's minions, so she'd devised an even more powerful form of body strengthening. There was a special ingredient in her CheatMates that removed the unconscious caps she put on her strengthening to ensure her muscles and bones wouldn't shatter and also allowed her to use spirit and evolution magic to reinforce her body despite having no aptitude for either. This was the power that allowed her to surpass all of her limits, Body Strengthening Level IV. And yet, even with this much strength, she wasn't even close to matching these apostles' stats.

"Is now really the time to get lost in thought?" Hearst asked, once again moving faster than Shea could track. She reappeared above Shea and swung down both claymores with all the force of her first debilitating attack.

"Sure is! Beating you guys'll be a piece of cake!" Shea shouted, blocking the claymores with the chain attached to Villedrucken. She then expertly redistributed the force of Hearst's swing and wrapped Villedrucken's chain around both of her swords. Of course, Hearst's blades were coated in disintegration magic, but everything Hajime had made was crafted with a special, super-dense alloy that could

withstand a few seconds of even Hearst's ridiculously powerful disintegration magic, which meant Shea was able to buy enough time to swap Villedrucken into bombardment mode and fire off a spatial-magic enhanced armor-piercing explosive round. It was a special bullet that exploded not on impact, but rather after piercing its target to maximize the damage of its spatial ruptures.

Even Hearst was taken aback when she saw that bullet, so she quickly dropped her claymores and crossed her arms in front of her to block. There was a loud boom as the bullet hit her, and the resulting explosion sent her flying.

"My turn now!" Shea shouted, flinging her chain and throwing Hearst's two claymores at Zweit, who'd circled behind her. And of course, she still had her kendama ball attached to the end of that chain.

By stepping on one end of the chain, she redirected the sphere down at Vierte, who'd been about to fire off a disintegration beam at her. Vierte backed away using the least amount of movement possible to try to maintain her aim. But that proved to be a mistake. She should have gotten as far away from that sphere as possible...because now, she was trapped within its gravitational field.

"Ah! I'm being dragged in?!"

Like Shizuku's blades, Shea's sphere had been enchanted with Attract. However, it had far more mass to it, and so, its gravitational field was much, much stronger.

The sphere smacked Vierte in the stomach, sending her flying. Unfortunately, flinging Hearst's claymores hadn't worked to deter Zweit as much as Shea had hoped.

"Whoa!"

Zweit flew up to Shea and fired a disintegration beam and a barrage of disintegration feathers at her from point-blank range.

Shea immediately brought Villedrucken up to guard her vitals. The surface of the hammer's head was coated in sealstone, so it could withstand even disintegration magic. But unfortunately, in this form, Villedrucken wasn't wide enough to cover her arms and legs. She was able to block the beam, but many of the feathers got past it and ripped through her limbs.

Shea quickly dropped to get out of the way of the barrage, but as she did, a pair of swords came flying up at her.

Did Zweit drop her weapons?! No, wait, those are Hearst's—

Shea twisted out of the way just in time, but she heard Hearst grab her weapons again as they flew past her. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Hearst standing there, looking no worse for wear. The only real thing Shea's attack had done was destroy Hearst's gauntlets.

Hearst looked coldly down at Shea, wondering if the little rabbit would even be able to fight back with her arms and legs in such a sorry state. She then crossed her claymores like a pair of scissors and prepared to snip Shea's head off. While it was true that Shea wouldn't be able to do anything to stop that attack with her limbs looking like Swiss cheese, they didn't stay that way for long.

"Not a problem!" Shea shouted.

"Your wounds!"

As Hearst closed in on her, Shea blocked the scissor attack by sticking Villedrucken between the two claymores and backflipping out of range. Her body had completely healed, and she was also bathed in glimmering black light.

Tio had used restoration magic on her. And not only that, but Tio's whip coiled around Zweit's wrist as she dived toward Shea and tried to slice her in half with her claymore.

Tio tugged on her whip, pulling Zweit to the side and causing her to fall harmlessly past Shea.

“You received help from Tio Klarus?”

“That’s right!” Shea answered, sliding Villedrucken out of Hearst’s scissored claymores before she could force another contest of strength and firing an Area Burst Bullet at Hearst’s face. This wasn’t a piercing bullet, since Shea just wanted a wide-area attack this time around. However, a spatial attack was still more than Hearst’s body could handle, so she quickly leaped back.

Vierte had returned now, though, and she fired a disintegration barrage at Shea.

“You’ll have to get through—Owwwwwwwwwwwwww!”

Tio jumped in to block the attack, but it hurt enough to leave her teary-eyed despite the protection afforded by her much-vaunted scales.

“Thanks for the body block, Tio-san!” Shea said, taking aim at Vierte and firing a piercing round at her.

Vierte hadn’t expected Shea to be so callous as to take advantage of Tio acting as her meat shield, so her surprise delayed her reaction just enough that Shea’s shot hit her in the shoulder. Shea then went over to Tio’s side, but their enemies didn’t give them any time to chat.

While Shea had been engaged in a close-quarters battle, Tio had been fighting from long-range. Now, though, Dritter and Funfte had a chance to close in on Tio, which they took immediately. Furthermore, Freid’s gray dragons, white leopards, and three-headed wolves all surrounded Shea and Tio to ensure they wouldn’t retreat.

Tio used her Dragon Claws and Shea used a barrage of Area Burst Bullets to knock the monsters back, but they’d bought enough time

for Dritter and Funfte to pincer the two of them. Dritter faced off against Shea, while Funfte stopped before Tio.

Without a word, Shea and Tio rotated to swap places. They both knew that was the optimal move, and they didn't need to say anything to communicate that.

A second later, Dritter fired a barrage of disintegration feathers as Funfte launched a beam.

"Your feathers are too light," Tio said with a smile, taking the feather hits with her scale armor and countering with a spiral breath attack of her own.

"I can handle focused attacks all day!" Shea shouted, yanking on her chain to pull her sphere back and smacking it toward the disintegration beam with Villedrucken. Its immense mass plowed right through the beam and went straight for Funfte.

The two of them then leaped up at the same time, dodging the invisible spatial rendering attack that Freid had sent at them.

"Tch, so you really are sharing your precognition with her?!" Freid shouted, directing Uranos to fire his breath at the two of them while they were in the air. But of course, Shea foresaw that as well, and the two of them easily evaded the attack by jumping to either side.

Zweit and Funfte fired another feather barrage at Shea, one attacking from above and the other from the side. She wasn't able to dodge them all, but the wounds she did take were immediately healed by Tio's restoration magic.

Shea knew Tio had her back if anything hit her, so she didn't even care about what injuries she took and swung her sphere around to knock Dritter and Vierte away, using Attract at full power to keep them from dodging.

While Shea was fighting Dritter and Funfte, Hearst closed in and tried to cut her down, but Tio once again got in the way to block. And while Hearst's slashes were strong enough to cut through even Tio's scales, she needed more than a few seconds to do it. And in those precious few seconds, Shea turned around and swung Villedrucken at her.

Hearst immediately shot up to avoid the swing, leaving Tio free to turn her attention to Freid, who was coming at her with a Void Fissure. However, Tio didn't bother blocking or dodging, instead opting to lash out with her whip.

Freid hesitated for a second upon seeing how little Tio seemed to care about his attack, leaving him wide open to Tio's whip. The tip of the whip moved blisteringly fast, bolstered by the centrifugal force of the swing.

Meanwhile, Tio fired a breath attack at Uranos to keep him from defending his master.

“Gaaah!”

Freid tried to cover himself with his wings, but the whip sliced right through them to score a deep gash on his chest. This whip was the specialized weapon Hajime had made for Tio, the Obsidian Dominator. The jewel inlaid into the handle was a miniature Treasure Trove, which allowed Tio to extend the whip up to three kilometers. It had also been crafted out of Tio's scales and was as rough as a file, making it perfect for cutting anything it scraped. Plus, it was enchanted with metamorphosis magic, so Tio could use it as an extension of one of her limbs. Moreover, it had spatial-severing abilities and was imbued with spirit magic, so Tio could use soul attacks with it as well.

The damage Freid received from the whip weakened his control over his Void Fissure, so the spell was only strong enough to crush a few of Tio's scales and elicit a small grunt from her.

Hearst, who'd been planning on getting a follow-up attack on Shea, immediately retreated from the front lines and went to support Freid, who'd started falling toward the ground.

"Freid-sama!"

"Ngh, I'm fine!" Freid roared as he shook Hearst off and flew back up with his own strength. The other apostles had stopped momentarily too when they'd seen Freid get hit. For whatever reason, it seemed the apostles valued Freid's life quite a bit. The only explanation Shea and Tio could think of was because Freid seemed to be in Alvaheit's old position.

"Tio-san, are you...? Yeah, I guess you're not okay. Thanks for being my meat shield, though."

"Mmmmm! I love how little you care about my well-being! There's nothing more pleasurable than being insulted by those closest to you! Thank you very much, Shea!" Tio exclaimed as she writhed in ecstasy. Still, she really did look to be in bad shape.

Restoration magic still wasn't working very well on her, so she couldn't immediately heal her wounds. Her scale armor was a derivative skill of her basic dragon transformation, so she could naturally regenerate her scales the same way she could while transformed, but it took more time. And while her armor was in bad shape, her flesh underneath that scale armor was probably even more damaged. Her kimono was tattered as well, enough that if she got rid of her scale armor, she'd look quite provocative.

"I doubt you can keep this up for much longer..." Shea said in a worried voice.

"It's fine, Shea. This is good," Tio replied, shooting Shea a meaningful glance. Shea suddenly brightened up, nodding along and saying, "Oh, I get it now."

"By the way, how are you holding up, Shea?"

"You've protected me for long enough. I'll be able to manage thanks to you."

"Wonderful. It heartens me to know I managed to fulfill my role as a guardian."

Shea and Tio chuckled to each other as they watched the apostles surround them from all sides. There was no despair in their eyes, however. In fact, they looked more pumped up than ever.

Meanwhile, Freid was taking advantage of this reprieve to heal himself and see how his monsters were faring against Tio's dragons. He'd ordered them to annihilate Tio's dragon army, which he believed was possible, since he had the overwhelming advantage in numbers. Sure, Shea and Tio had taken out quite a few of his monsters during their initial assault, but there were still far more monsters left than dragons.

Honestly, he'd expected his monsters to have cleaned up Tio's dragons by now, but when he looked up to see what was happening, he was met with a shocking sight.

Impossible.

They'd barely thinned the dragons' numbers. Plus...a good chunk of his own monsters had been slain. Tio had lost maybe ten dragons during this time, whereas over a hundred of Freid's monsters were dead. Even if Tio's dragons had happened to be stronger, that didn't explain this overwhelming difference in firepower. However, there was one other factor that was widening the gap between Freid's monsters and Tio's dragons.

All of the equipment those dragons are using are artifacts made by the Irregular, aren't they?!

He watched as the helmet on one of the black dragons started to glow as it unleashed its breath attack. One of Freid's gray dragons countered with its aurora breath, but thanks to the amplifying powers of the helmet, as well as the evolution magic stored in the dragon's armor, its black spiral punched right through the aurora attack and shot through the head of the gray dragon. The breath attack continued onward, killing a few more of Freid's monsters as well.

Hoping to get Tio's dragon while it was focusing on attacking, one of Freid's Ahatods tried to punch it in the stomach. Its fist, wreathed in crimson mana, was strong enough to annihilate most creatures. And yet, when it collided with the dragon's armor, it was the fist that was crushed, not the armor. It seemed the armor the dragons were wearing reacted to any impact by unleashing shockwaves of its own.

Completely unfazed by the Ahatod's attack, the dragon swiped at it with its tail, which had a spatial-severing blade attached to its end. The Ahatod couldn't react in time, so its head was easily bisected.

Naturally, all of the dragons' claws were coated in metal sheaths that were themselves artifacts. Those artifacts were enchanted with spatial-severing magic as well, but they were also enchanted with Gale Claw. That same dragon used its Gale Claw to slice through a clump of chimeras once it was done with the Ahatod.

In the distance, another black dragon was weaving between attacks with barrel rolls, dives, and sudden ascents.

Another one of the effects of the armor all the dragons were equipped with was lessening the effects of gravity around them. The weight of their armor and their own weight were cut in half. Thus, they could easily dodge the gray dragons' breath attacks, the leopards' tentacles, and everything in between, and they were doing

it all with such ease it seemed as if they could predict their enemies' attacks. Which, frankly, they could. After all, the helmets were enchanted with Foresight. They couldn't exactly see into the future the way Shea could, but with all of their abilities buffed by evolution magic, they could at least roughly predict the trajectory of most attacks headed their way. Moreover, all of their breath attacks were lethal, with each one cutting its target down with pinpoint precision.

"I hate this! Even when he's not here, that man brings disaster!"

"Come now, don't give Master all the credit. These dragons are the culmination of all of us working together. I hope you enjoy the fruits of our labor!" Tio declared, a wide grin on her face.

In truth, it was Shea and Kaori who'd captured the wyverns in the abyss. Hajime had then made their weapons and armor, and after Tio had returned from her journey home, she was the one who'd turned them into familiars. She'd then spent as much time as possible in the Hour Crystal room strengthening them and upgrading them from wyverns to dragons. Thanks to everyone's hard work, this dragon army was now so strong that any individual dragon could easily beat any of the monsters in the abyss.

Incidentally, they hadn't been black before, but Tio had made them black because she preferred that color. By her reasoning, it made sense for the familiars of the woman who served the man everyone called the new Demon Lord to look evil and imposing. And nothing said evil and imposing more than black.

"Calm down, Freid-sama. I have an idea," Hearst said in her usual emotionless voice.

"Hm? What is it?" Freid asked, swallowing his anger at Hajime and turning to Hearst.

After confirming that all of Freid's wounds had healed, Hearst glared at Shea like a predator staring down their prey and said, "Their

coordination is too strong. We need to tear them apart. We apostles will take Shea Haulia."

"Is there a point to splitting them up?"

"When Uranos hit Tio Klarus with his breath, she wasn't able to dodge ahead of time. Their fighting style only works so long as Tio Klarus's defensive and recovery capabilities give Shea Haulia the time she needs to predict things for others."

"Whoops, looks like they figured us out," Shea said, sticking her tongue out.

"Very well, you take rabbitgirl. Uranos and I still need to pay that dragonman back for what happened at the Grand Gruen Volcano."

"Understood."

Even with their coordination, Shea and Tio were simply an annoyance to Hearst and the apostles. She figured once they were separated, they'd be reduced to nothing more than easy targets.

After hearing Hearst's plan, Shea grinned and turned to Tio.

"Tio-san."

"Hrm... Will you be all right?"

"I'll be fine. They're all just god's puppets, right? Besides, you'll have an easier time if you don't have to protect me."

This time, it was Shea's turn to shoot Tio a meaningful look. Tio shrugged her shoulders in agreement.

To Hearst and the apostles, it just sounded like Tio was glad she wouldn't have to be a meat shield anymore, but Freid narrowed his eyes suspiciously. He suddenly had a bad feeling about this plan, but before he could say anything, Hearst pointed her claymores at Shea.

"I'm tired of your boasting, rabbitgirl. It's time I put you in your place."

Radiating particles of light, Hearst shot toward Shea so fast that she looked like a platinum streak.

“Hah! I’d like to see you try!” Shea shouted, charging toward Hearst.

As Tio watched her go, Freid’s pure-white mana started swirling around him.

“You’re not going to fully transform?” he asked.

“That would just make me a bigger target.”

“You don’t have to protect your comrade anymore. There’s no reason for you to hold back. I want you to unleash your full power. Only after beating you at your full strength will I be able to cleanse my past shame and hold my head high when I report back to Lord Ehit.”

“So what? Let me tell you something, youngster,” Tio replied. She had finished fully repairing her scale armor. As pure-black mana swirled around her, she continued in a haughty voice, “Don’t get too cocky. If you wish to see the full extent of my power, force me to use it first!”

She grinned arrogantly, and for a moment, Freid fell silent. But then, he shouted, “Uranoooooooos!”

In response, his beloved dragon partner fired a breath attack at Tio. Tio prepared to leap out of the way, but then a portal appeared in front of Urano’s attack. It almost seemed like it was there to protect Tio, but of course, she knew that wasn’t the case. Looking up, she saw that there was another portal directly above her, and the breath attack had been rerouted through it. She still managed to dodge to the side in time, but the breath attack then went down into another portal and suddenly reappeared at Tio’s side.

Tio was slowly being trapped in a cage made by a single breath attack. But even as Freid was manipulating the portals, he was also

preparing an ancient magic attack. He gathered a ridiculous amount of mana and even said an incantation to further increase the power of his attack.

“Voidshatter!” he shouted, loosing his spell in the center of Tio’s dragon army.

A huge spherical spatial explosion tore through everything around it, including Freid’s own monsters. This attack was of a greater magnitude than anything Freid had cast before. He’d lost a third of his own monsters, but Tio had lost eighty percent of her dragons. Most of them weren’t killed outright thanks to the defensive properties of their artifacts, but they were either knocked unconscious or ravaged so thoroughly they couldn’t fight.

Meanwhile, the breath cage had finally managed to land a glancing blow on Tio. Even that was enough to shred the armor on her left side, scattering her scales and blood across the battlefield.

Unconcerned with her own injuries, Tio turned to see how her dragons were faring.

“How indiscriminate...” Tio said, prompting Freid to scoff.

“This is what happens when I get serious.”

The lives of his familiars meant far less to him than completing the divine mission given to him by Ehit. In fact, nothing was as important as winning this battle and slaying Hajime’s companions.

“Do you have the resolve to sacrifice anything and everything to achieve victory?”

As he was now, Freid would even sacrifice fellow demons if that was what it took to win. Though it was hard to say if he was determined...or simply insane.

Instead of replying, Tio merely gave him a pitying sigh. Then, as if spitting on his resolve, she worked a simple miracle.

“Dragon Queen’s Grace.”

Black mana rippled out from her, raining down on her battered dragons. They were quite literally receiving the grace of their queen right now.

Dragon Queen’s Grace was a combination spirit and restoration magic spell that used spirit magic to target only the things Tio wanted to, as well as keep deceased creatures’ souls attached to their bodies, while the restoration magic portion healed them. Within a few minutes, Tio’s dragons would all be fully resurrected and ready to fight once more.

The dragons that were still conscious let out small roars of gratitude as Tio’s magic healed them. And soon enough, they all started taking flight again, wreathed in the protection of their queen. Knowing that they didn’t need to fear death, they fought even more aggressively than before, taking down as many of Freid’s monsters as they could before they were struck down.

Freid felt like he was trapped in a nightmare. In fact, he was so stunned by Tio’s spell that he let her get another attack in. She lashed out with her whip, coiling it around one of Freid’s three-headed wolves.

“Be reborn as one of my familiars—Dragon Queen’s Edict!”

Tio’s voice was filled with the majesty and power only a true ruler could muster.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The bound wolf let out a pained howl. It didn’t sound like any howl a real wolf would make, and it made Freid’s hairs stand on end.

“Wh-What did you just do?!” Freid asked, shaken. With several grotesque popping and cracking sounds, the three-headed wolf started to transform.

And in the span of just three seconds, its three heads shrank into one, its entire body was covered with black scales, its tail and claws elongated, and wings sprouted from its back. It had been transformed into a black dragon.

This was another one of Tio's new spells, Dragon Evolution. She had used spirit magic to isolate the part of her genome that made her a dragonman and now could use a combination of metamorphosis and spirit magic to implant those same genes into other creatures, turning them into dragons and her familiars at the same time.

Of course, normally, it was impossible to take control of another person's familiar in the span of just a few seconds. But luckily, Tio's Obsidian Dominator could make the impossible possible. The true purpose of her artifact was to help her more easily turn things into dragons.

Thanks to her high aptitude for metamorphosis magic and her Obsidian Dominator, Tio could forcibly convert pretty much anything into her familiar, so long as she also dragonified it. It was a rather strange weapon for a masochist, but it at least fit the perverted part of Tio's personality.

Shea and the others had definitely given Hajime some looks when he'd presented her with the whip.

"I think I can push this a little further!" Tio shouted, swinging her whip again while Freid was still stupefied. This time, her whip split into three ends, grabbing three different monsters at once, which Tio immediately transformed.

Seeing that, Uranos let out a massive roar to wake his master up, and Freid quickly returned to his senses.

"Time to put a stop to this!" he shouted, firing a barrage of disintegration feathers while Uranos unleashed his breath. The

feathers curved around Tio, blocking off her path of escape while the breath went right at her.

Unconcerned by the damage they might cause, Tio jumped into the feather barrage to avoid the breath. If she was going to get hit either way, it made more sense to get hit by the thing that hurt less.



Still, while that was a logical decision to make, it wasn't like Freid's feathers did no damage at all. Indeed, while Tio survived, a good number of her scales were shorn off, falling to the ground along with droplets of blood.

"I got another one!" Tio shouted, pushing through Freid's barrage and grabbing a clump of monsters that were slightly separated from the rest. She could have retreated behind her dragon army and been a lot safer, but that would have run the risk of exposing them to Freid's and Uranos's attacks. At any rate, this time she split her whip into five and transformed five monsters at once.

Freid was losing his army and Tio was increasing the size of hers, but now that Freid had regained his composure, he wasn't too worried.

"Pathetic. Purposely taking hits is a terrible way of fighting."

"This is a perfectly acceptable tactic, you know?"

"As if. You're simply taking advantage of your natural toughness. What part of that is strategic? I admit stealing my familiars was a surprising use of metamorphosis magic, but if you're slowly killing yourself to make it work, what's the point?"

Freid found Tio's fighting style laughable. And so, he once again fired a barrage of disintegration feathers around her while Uranos aimed his breath right at her.

Again, Tio braved the feather barrage to add to her dragon army. And it was then that Freid realized Tio was gambling that her endurance would last long enough to flip the numbers advantage in her favor and beat him down.

That was indeed Tio's plan. However, it was only a single part of it. What Freid wasn't aware of was that she was also sowing the seeds

for another one of her trump cards, though she hoped she wouldn't need to use it.

Chapter VI: Shea Haulia's Utter Domination of the Platinum Apostles

"To think you would allow yourself to be separated from your comrade... You've let your emotions get the better of you," Hearst said in an almost disappointed voice.

Shea and the apostles were a good distance away from Tio and Freid now.

"I dunno, it seems to me like you're getting pretty emotional yourself," Shea replied, tapping her boots against the ground to make sure they were still in good working order.

In the air, the apostles had the advantage. Shea couldn't maneuver as well as them, and she had to constantly worry about surprise attacks from below. Thus, as they'd pulled away from Tio's battlefield, Shea had pretended to lose every exchange to fall closer and closer to the ground. Honestly, she'd expected the apostles to bombard her with disintegration attacks until she was forced to take to the skies again, but to her surprise, they followed her to the battlefield she'd chosen.

The five of them surrounded Shea in a pentagram formation and were even exchanging words with her before attacking. Considering how mechanically efficient they usually were, Shea found the change odd. Still, she stowed her ball and chain in her Treasure Trove and took advantage of the moment of reprieve to replenish her mana from the crystal set in her hammer's pommel.

"Surrender, Shea Haulia. Accept your inferiority and bow before us."

There was no arrogance in Hearst's voice. However, for whatever reason, there was something akin to hatred. If Shea was fated to die either way, Hearst wanted her to die in despair with her spirit broken, not after a fierce battle where she fought to the bitter end.

Normally, Shea would have simply laughed off Hearst's words, but this time, she didn't respond immediately. In fact, her mind was covered in a haze, and for a moment, she almost felt like it wouldn't be such a bad idea to surrender here.

"Ah!"

The moment she realized what was happening, Shea bit her lip, the sharp pain clearing away the fog addling her brain. She then looked back up just in time to see a disintegration beam heading straight for her.

"Don't underestimate me!" Shea shouted, swinging Villedrucken at the beam. The sealstone coating, combined with the mana shockwaves it emitted and Shea's insane strength, allowed her to disperse the beam with one swing.

After that, she brought her hammer back up, lowered her center of gravity, and perked her ears up to prepare for the next attack. In an angry voice, she spat, "You're making a big mistake if you think your mind-control magic's gonna work on me."

"I must admit, I'm impressed that you managed to break free of my charm so easily. It's been strengthened significantly," Hearst stated. She hadn't actually expected it to work, though. Her goal had been something else entirely.

"However, it seems you didn't see any possible futures where you died while under the influence of my charm, did you?" she asked. Shea's ears twitched as she realized the charm spell had just been an experiment.

"What of it?" she asked warily.

"I suppose that means I still haven't decided whether to overwhelm you with our superior might or to force you to use Future Sight so much that you run out of mana."

"Now you're just pissing me off!" Shea scowled, the fur on her ears standing on end.

Hearst was sorely underestimating Shea, treating her like a rabbit that had already been cornered. She seemed to think the only question remaining was whether it would be more enjoyable to end it in one blow or to torture her prey to death. Weirdly enough, it almost sounded like she had a vested interest in deriving as much pleasure from Shea's death as possible. However, both her expression and gaze were as flat as always, and she was simply stating the truth as she saw it after analyzing Shea's strength.

It was undeniably true that the platinum apostles' stats were far higher than Shea's, even after her Level IV power boost. The only reason she'd managed to hold on so far was thanks to her Future Sight.

Shea's Body Strengthening converted her mana into physical might, but it didn't actually drain any mana to keep active. The reason creatures with extremely high mana pools naturally grew physically stronger was because they unconsciously converted the excess mana they weren't using into physical might via Body Strengthening. But that didn't deplete their mana, as it was simply converting it into a different form.

However, Future Sight was different. Every use of it cost Shea quite a bit of mana. Plus, there was a limit to how much reserve mana was stored in Villedrucken's crystal, and unfortunately, Shea had gone through half of it already. It was hardly surprising that Hearst thought she had an overwhelming advantage here, to the point where she could freely choose Shea's demise, even.

That really pissed Shea off, though. After all, the only reason Hearst and the other four apostles were so confident was thanks to their insanely boosted stats. And the source of that stat boost was none other than—

“You guys are using Yue-san’s mana, aren’t you?”

Shea was sure of it. Regular apostles had silver mana, but these apostles’ mana had a little bit of gold mixed in, making it look more platinum. Over the course of her journey, Shea had seen that golden color more times than she could count. There was no doubt in her mind that it belonged to her savior, her mentor, and her best friend—Yue.

Of course, Shea knew that it was Ehit who was controlling Yue’s body and providing her mana to the apostles, but that didn’t change the fact that these five were stealing mana that didn’t belong to them. Not only that, but they were also using it against the people Yue cared about most.

“Know your place, you mindless puppets.”

Shea was angrier than she’d ever been in her life, but she didn’t let that emotion consume her. After all, Yue had taught her to keep her head clear in battle, no matter what.

Hearst’s lips twitched a little. She looked almost displeased as she said, “Watch your tongue, rabbitgirl. That body, its mana, its everything, belongs to our lord. The vampire princess you knew is no more.”

“.....”

The air crackled as Shea controlled her rage and used it to fuel her fighting spirit. Then, in a voice as cold as ice, one she’d never use around Hajime or any other of her beloved comrades, she said, “Listen up and listen well, you pieces of shit.”

She swung Villedrucken in front of her, buffeting Hearst with a gust of wind.

"Yue-san doesn't belong to anyone. And there's only one person in this world who's allowed to see all of Yue. The monster of the abyss you guys call the Irregular."

Shea was radiating an enormous amount of pressure, while also looking as solemn and dignified as a sage.

"As a Diviner who can see the future, I'll let you in on a little secret. You and your shitty god have no future."

Hearst fell silent, feeling the weight of fate in Shea's proclamation. Even though the sounds of Tio and Freid's battle could be heard in the distance, the island they were on felt eerily silent. Still, after a moment, Hearst recovered her composure and replied in a cool voice, saying, "Nonsense. Our lord is absolute. Not even the Irregular could harm him at the Demon Lord's castle. Besides, look over there, Shea Haulia. Tio Klarus appears to be losing to Freid as well. She won't last long with those wounds. Plus, you yourself stand no chance against us. Can you truly not see it? Or are you simply pretending not to? The ones with no future are you and your companions."

Hearst was simply making what she thought was an objectively correct statement. And honestly, given what she'd seen so far, she was right. But of course, that wasn't all there was to Shea Haulia.

"Did I ever say this was the extent of my strength?" she asked, her lips curling up into a terrifying grin.

"Hm? What do you—?"

Hearst suddenly fell silent as Shea rested Villedrucken on her shoulder and said, "Level V!"

The air crackled as power surged from Shea, a pale-blue spiral of mana shooting up to the heavens.

Hearst's eyes widened in shock, and she flatly said, "So you could strengthen yourself even further?"

Shea leaped forward with enough might to crack the ground underneath her, swinging Villedrucken down at Hearst, who raised one of her claymores to block. There was a deafening clang of metal against metal, and the ground underneath Hearst cracked, but her arm didn't even tremble.

"But that still is not enough to match us."

Using just her arm strength, Hearst pushed Shea back.

It was the sad truth, but even after using CheatMates and getting her body used to Level IV so she could push to Level V, Shea's trump card still wasn't close to matching the platinum apostles' strength. If there was anyone who could have checked both sides' stats, this is what they would have seen:

Strength: 22,000 [Upper Limit: 66,000]

Vitality: 22,000 [Upper Limit: 66,000]

Defense: 22,000 [Upper Limit: 66,000]

Agility: 22,000 [Upper Limit: 66,000]

Magic: 22,000 [Upper Limit: 66,000]

Magic Defense: 22,000 [Upper Limit: 66,000]

A regular apostle only had 12,000 in all stats, while their quasi-Limit Break brought them up to 36,000. In other words, the platinum apostles had nearly double the stats of a regular one. Meanwhile, at Level V, Shea's stats were:

Strength: 100 [AFCM (Artifact CheatMate) & evolution magic necklace: 200] -> [With Level V boost: 38,200]

Vitality: 120 [AFCM: 240] -> [With Level V boost: 38,240]

Defense: 100 [AFCM: 200] -> [With Level V boost: 38,200]

Agility: 130 [AFCM: 260] -> [With Level V boost: 38,260]

Magic: 3,800 [AFCM: 7,600]

Magic Defense: 4,000 [AFCM: 8,000]

She was stronger than a regular apostle, but nowhere near the strength of a platinum one. Hearst was right that Shea still stood no chance, but she was making one grave mistake.

As Shea flew through the air, she grinned savagely. There wasn't even a hint of despair in her eyes. Two apostles flanked her on either side and fired off platinum beams of light at her, which she dodged by firing off Villedrucken and accelerating her flight with the recoil. She adjusted her posture midair and swung at Zweit, who'd been waiting to ambush her from behind.

Then, she shouted, "Level VI!"

"What?!" Zweit exclaimed, lifting both of her claymores to block. Platinum and light-blue mana shockwaves rippled out from the point of impact.

Zweit had correctly surmised that she'd need all of her strength to block this attack. That was just how dangerous Shea's swing had been. Even after putting her all into blocking, she'd been pushed backward for the first time, her feet leaving deep grooves in the ground.

However, Shea's stats still weren't as high as those of the platinum apostles. They came in at:

Strength: 100 [AFCM: 200] -> [With Level VI boost: 45,800]

Vitality: 120 [AFCM: 240] -> [With Level VI boost: 45,840]

Defense: 100 [AFCM: 200] -> [With Level VI boost: 45,800]

Agility: 130 [AFCM: 260] -> [With Level VI boost: 45,860]

Magic: 3,800 [AFCM: 7,600]

Magic Defense: 4,000 [AFCM: 8,000]

Fortunately, Hajime's artifacts and Shea's own ancient magic were enough to make up the stat deficit now.

As Shea and Zweit pushed against each other, Shea poured mana into Villedrucken, causing its head to slide forward and start rotating at high speeds. Zweit barely had time to register what was happening before Shea hit her with a follow-up attack.

"Take this!" she shouted, squeezing the trigger on Villedrucken's handle. Following that, there was a tremendous roar as a pitch-black pile bunker shot out of the hammer's face, pulverizing Zweit's claymores and shooting straight at the apostle's forehead.

"Ngh?!"

With a grunt, Zweit whipped her head to the side just in time to avoid being gored. The pile bunker still grazed her, knocking her circlet off and drawing blood. It also sliced through a few strands of hair, which floated in front of Zweit's face before falling to the ground.

Dritter flew above Shea, while Vierte and Funfte circled to either side, and the three of them simultaneously launched feather barrages at her. Zweit also thrust her hand forward and attempted to hit Shea with a point-blank disintegration beam, while Hearst closed in from behind and swung her two claymores down at Shea.

There was nowhere for her to run. Hearst and the others were finally recognizing Shea as a proper threat, so they were trying to eliminate her immediately. They couldn't afford to take the time to torture her, so they'd decided to go with the "kill her with overwhelming force" option. In fact, they knew that Zweit would likely get caught up in this combination attack and die as well but were still going through with it.

Seeing that there was no escape, Shea closed her eyes.

"Have you finally given up?!" Hearst shouted. She couldn't think of any other reason Shea would close her eyes at this critical juncture. But of course, no one beat this rabbitgirl when it came to tenacity.

A second later, all of the attacks passed through Shea.

"Huh?!"

For the very first time, the apostles' expressions changed, along with the look in their eyes. Their surprise was only natural, however, as Shea herself hadn't moved a single step. And yet, somehow, every single attack had missed her, by virtue of going straight through her.

Upon closer inspection, Hearst and the others realized that the Shea in front of them was translucent, which explained what had happened.

Shea had used one of her new spatial magic spells, Half-Teleport. This spell transported half of her body to different coordinates, making her immune to all attacks hitting her original coordinates. But in return, Shea herself couldn't attack...or even move. Still, it was an extremely powerful defensive tool.

In truth, this was a failed teleport spell that only partially worked because of how low Shea's affinity for spatial magic was. It was only after immense strengthening that Shea could use this dangerous and defective spell, and if anyone else even tried it, they'd risk ripping themselves apart.

Of course, because of Shea's awful affinity, this spell cost an obscene amount of mana. As Shea was using all of her innate mana for Body Strengthening, she couldn't afford to lose any of it and was relying on the stockpile left in her gem.

In other words, this was the only time she'd be able to use this spell in this fight, which was precisely why Shea was planning on taking maximum advantage of the opening she'd created with it.

As soon as the last of the attacks had passed through her, she canceled her Half-Teleport and stepped forward, closing in on Zweit. Zweit barely had time to react before Shea grabbed the apostle's face in a claw grip and dug her nails into Zweit's porcelain skin.

"Level VII!"

Strength: 100 [AFCM: 200] -> [With Level VII boost: 53,400]

Vitality: 120 [AFCM: 240] -> [With Level VII boost: 53,440]

Defense: 100 [AFCM: 200] -> [With Level VII boost: 53,400]

Agility: 130 [AFCM: 260] -> [With Level VII boost: 53,460]

Magic: 3,800 [AFCM: 7,600]

Magic Defense: 4,000 [AFCM: 8,000]

Shea's stats skyrocketed yet again. Though she'd come from the weakest race in Tortus, she was now more than strong enough to utterly overwhelm any normal apostle with her stats alone.

With her boosted stats, she charged through the encirclement, dragging Zweit along with her. Her first step accelerated her to the point where the scenery around her became nothing more than a blur. Her second step made her so fast that Zweit couldn't move due to the g-forces on her. Her third step broke the sound barrier. And once she hit top speed, she slammed Zweit into a nearby boulder.

Thanks to Zweit's ridiculously high defense stat, her head didn't pop like a tomato, and it was instead the boulder that shattered.

"That's not enough to—!"

"Shut the fuck up!"

Shea didn't stop at just the boulder. After it had been pulverized, she kept charging forward and slammed Zweit's head into the ground. She then stomped on Zweit's head for good measure, pushing her even farther into the bedrock.

After that, Shea turned around and fired an Area Burst Bullet at Hearst and the others, who were closing in from behind, and leaped into the air. The ring on her finger glowed, and she took a massive chunk of metal out of her Treasure Trove. It was shaped like a cylinder, twenty meters long, and ten meters in diameter. As it started to fall, Shea extended Villedrucken's handle and stuck the entire hammer into an opening on the cylinder's side.

It was then that Hearst and the others realized what it was Shea had brought out.

This was Villedrucken's new peripheral attachment, the hundred-ton hammer. Its weight was slightly reduced via gravity magic, but it was still too heavy for anyone other than Shea to wield. She swung it like a pendulum, using momentum to raise it high into the air.

Meanwhile, Zweit used disintegration magic to extricate her head from the bedrock just in time to look up and see Shea hurtling down toward her with the hundred-ton hammer.

"I'll grind you into dust!" Shea roared as she swung her hammer down, generating as much force as one of Hajime's Gravity Meteors. Her insane strength, combined with the sheer mass of the hammer and the force of gravity aiding the swing, was enough to smash through the entire island they were on if she hit it directly.

Zweit covered herself with her wings in an attempt to block, but it wasn't nearly enough. The hammer smashed into her with the force of an asteroid, and the entire island shook as it sank a few dozen meters lower. Massive cracks spread out from the point of impact, covering the entire island's surface, as Shea's hundred-ton hammer rested atop Zweit like a grave marker. The shockwave caused by the impact was enough to stagger Hearst and the others as well.

After a second, just to make sure she'd gotten Zweit, Shea activated the hundred-ton hammer's special ability. There was a high-pitched whine as the face of the hammer started rotating at high speeds.

"Hajime-san said it best... Drills are justice!"

The hundred-ton hammer's true purpose was to pin an enemy down, and then start rotating at high speeds with its bladed end to slowly rip them to shreds. The whole thing was also coated in sealstone to make it impossible to destroy with disintegration magic. As the hundred-ton hammer slowly drilled its way into the ground, it shredded through more and more of Zweit.

Hearst didn't seem to care at all about the predicament she was in, and she along with the other apostles simply charged at Shea. They finished surrounding her just as she extricated Villedrucken from the hundred-ton hammer.

Unfortunately, the giant pillar was right behind her, preventing her from backing away, which was why Hearst and the others had opted to surround her. They didn't know Shea couldn't use Half-Teleport anymore, so they'd gone through the trouble of surrounding her like this instead of simply bombarding her with ranged attacks.

"You're finished! We'll just keep stabbing you until you phase back into solidness!" Hearst shouted. And in response, the four apostles thrust their eight claymores at Shea from all sides.

Again, there was nowhere she could go to dodge, so she pulled out a different trump card.

There was the sound of metal clashing against metal as the claymores hit Shea's body. She hadn't used Villedrucken or even an artifact to block the attacks. She'd simply stopped them with her bare body.

This was her new metamorphosis magic spell, Steel Form. It hardened her skin until it was as tough as steel. Like Tio's scale armor, it used the trace amount of metals in her body as a base for creating the defensive coating, and it also cost an enormous amount of mana, though not quite as much as her Half-Teleport. Moreover, it splendidly did its job of stopping the apostles' claymores from stabbing her head, neck, shoulders, arms, chest, and legs.

"You won't get to pierce my body that easily," Shea said in a cocky voice.

The apostles couldn't even refute her words, since their swords really had been repelled. The disintegration-magic coating on them was chipping away at Shea's defenses, and she had been cut lightly, but it would take more than a few seconds to fully break through. And of course, she wasn't planning on giving them that time.

Shea shrank Villedrucken's handle back to its normal length, then grinned at Hearst, who was still trying to process the strange way in which she'd used metamorphosis magic.

Before Hearst could stop her, she yelled, "Level VIII!"

Strength: 100 [AFCM: 200] -> [With Level VIII boost: 61,000]

Vitality: 120 [AFCM: 240] -> [With Level VIII boost: 61,040]

Defense: 100 [AFCM: 200] -> [With Level VIII boost: 61,000]

Agility: 130 [AFCM: 260] -> [With Level VIII boost: 61,060]

Magic: 3,800 [AFCM: 7,600]

Magic Defense: 4,000 [AFCM: 8,000]

Shea's aura of mana pulsed once more as her stats grew yet again. She was pretty close to the apostles in stats now, and they looked visibly worried for the first time.

"Impossible. No mortal should be able to reach this level of might."

"Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but surpassing our limits is what we mortals do best."

Shea knocked Hearst's swords back with Villedrucken, in a complete reversal of the first time they'd clashed. Now it was Hearst who was left defenseless, which Shea took full advantage of.

"Hiyaaah!"

Shea swung Villedrucken in an arc, building up centrifugal force before slamming it into Hearst's stomach.

"Gah!" Hearst shouted, coughing up blood as she was sent flying. She dropped one of her swords as well, her hand numb.

Dritter tried to take advantage of the opening Shea had created when she'd attacked to cut her down, but Shea just let herself free-fall back to the ground to dodge instead. Vierte and Funfte launched a barrage of feather and beam attacks at her, but she just used Prophetic Visions to dodge out of the way.

Unless the apostles bombarded her from all sides, no ranged attacks would be able to hit Shea. Moreover, thanks to their ability to share thoughts, Dritter and the others knew that Hearst had taken a pretty crippling blow and that Zweit had finally been, as Shea put it, ground into dust by the hundred-ton hammer's drilling.

Apostles were one of the symbols of Ehit's absolute might, and these upgraded five were especially symbolic in that regard. And yet, they

were being pushed back by the very same opponent they'd been overwhelming mere moments ago. On top of that, one of them had been slain and another gravely injured.

As Dritter and the others closed in on Shea, they thought back to what she'd said before round two had begun.

"You and your shitty god have no future."

Dritter gritted her teeth, reminding herself that Shea had simply been speaking nonsense.

"Shea Haulia! You are no longer welcome on our lord's game board!" she shouted, trying to get Shea's ominous prophecy out of her head. Leaving a trail of glowing platinum motes behind her, she dived toward Shea at top speed. She then swung her claymores down with enough strength to split the island down the middle.

In response, Shea simply readied Villedrucken for a parry swing, as if the difference in kinetic energy between the two of them meant nothing to her.

Foolish girl, now you've finally gotten too cocky! Dritter thought, preemptively celebrating her victory.

While it was true that Shea had strengthened herself to an inordinate degree, her stats were still lower than the apostles', and Dritter's attack was boosted further by the power of gravity. There was no way Villedrucken would be able to fully block Dritter's attack. And yet, Dritter couldn't help but feel a sense of unease as she drew closer.

Why...? Why are you opening your mouth?! What are you about to say?!

Of course, Dritter knew *exactly* what Shea was about to say. Reading lips was but a simple task for someone as powerful as her, and she had, of course, heard Shea make the same mouth movements

exactly five times before. Still, in a manner that was very uncharacteristic of an apostle, Dritter couldn't help but hope that Shea was doing something else.

Shea Haulia had been born as a somewhat unique member of the world's weakest race. Despite being a rabbitman, she'd mustered up the courage to challenge enemies far stronger than her. And as a result, she'd grown stronger the more she fought.

Even a dragonman who'd lived for over five hundred years had praised that courage of hers, saying she was more fit to be a hero than the real hero. Among the people who'd been born and raised within Tortus, she was undoubtedly the strongest.

Slowly but surely, she'd built up her strength...and now she'd finally clawed her way up to the realm of the strongest apostles.

Dritter felt a shiver run down her spine.

"Stop!" she pleaded.

"Level IX!"

Strength: 100 [AFCM: 200] -> [With Level IX boost: 68,600]

Vitality: 120 [AFCM: 240] -> [With Level IX boost: 68,640]

Defense: 100 [AFCM: 200] -> [With Level IX boost: 68,600]

Agility: 130 [AFCM: 260] -> [With Level IX boost: 68,660]

Magic: 3,800 [AFCM: 7,600]

Magic Defense: 4,000 [AFCM: 8,000]

At long last, Shea Haulia had surpassed the apostles in stats. She swung Villedrucken up to intercept Dritter's claymores.

An explosion of shockwaves erupted from their weapons as they clashed, and the ground around Shea sank, forming a crater. However, Shea herself was unhurt. Even though Dritter's swings had been backed by a heaping dose of kinetic energy, the two of them were evenly matched. Sparks erupted from the point where Villedrucken and Dritter's two swords met.

"It is the height of blasphemy to dare to match an apostle's might! Die, Shea Haulia!" Dritter exclaimed. She sounded so furious that it was hard to believe anyone had once thought the apostles emotionless. She flapped her wings, trying to add more force to her attack to bury Shea Haulia once and for all. But for all of her outward anger, she knew the emotion she was truly experiencing right now was fear. She was fighting as hard as she could to try to push that fear out of her mind.

Shea, of course, sensed that fear, so she gave Dritter a toothy grin, looking more like a wolf than a rabbit.

"Hah, you're finally starting to act like a person instead of a doll! I like it!"

Suddenly, something wrapped around Dritter's neck.

"Is this...hair?!"

Indeed, it was Shea's hair. It coiled around Dritter and started choking her while also dragging her sideways. Shea tilted Villedrucken to the side at the same time, causing Dritter's claymores to slide past Shea and leaving the apostle exposed. Vierte and Funfte were coming in from either side to pincer Shea, but she was ready for both of them as well.

"Outta the way!"

"Ngh!"

Shea punched Dritter on the cheek, sending her bouncing across the ground toward Vierte. Vierte easily managed to dodge out of the way, but that ruined her coordination with Funfte, so her attack was slightly delayed.

Shea then turned to Funfte and opened her mouth to speak the dreaded words once more.

“Impossible! This can’t be! No one should be able to defeat us!” Funfte shouted, her expression stiff. Unfortunately for her, there was nothing she could do to stop Shea.

“This is the last one...Level X!”

Strength: 100 [AFCM: 200] -> [With Level X boost: 76,200]

Vitality: 120 [AFCM: 240] -> [With Level X boost: 76,240]

Defense: 100 [AFCM: 200] -> [With Level X boost: 76,200]

Agility: 130 [AFCM: 260] -> [With Level X boost: 76,260]

Magic: 3,800 [AFCM: 7,600]

Magic Defense: 4,000 [AFCM: 8,000]

Her sky-blue eyes glowed like jewels. The roaring storm of pale-blue mana compressed to a small, sky-blue sphere around her, making her look like a mini-planet.

Shea’s physical stats were so unbelievably high now that they surpassed the apostles’ by a good ten thousand. They could no longer even touch her.

Shea leaped forward, and to Funfte, it looked like she just vanished. At this point, it was the apostles’ eyes that couldn’t keep up with Shea’s speed.

Funfte didn't even have time to get over her shock before a shadow appeared behind her. Right as she turned around, she saw Shea's hammer bearing down on her.

"Ngh, how can this be happening..." Vierte mumbled, watching on in horror as Villedrucken slammed into Funfte and turned her into little more than a bloody stain on the ground. Her legs turned to jelly as she realized she'd end up like that as well if she charged in blindly.

Dritter, who'd finally recovered, felt the same way.

Vierte turned to her and said in a shaky voice, "Dritter, at this rate..."

She couldn't bring herself to finish that sentence, however.

Dritter said nothing in response and instead turned to Shea. Upon examining her—or more specifically her hammer—a little more closely, Dritter noticed something.

"That's..."

Villedrucken was filled with countless tiny cracks.

In retrospect, that made perfect sense. After all, the hammer had been exposed to multiple disintegration attacks and had absorbed impacts that could destroy entire landmasses head-on. And now, Shea was swinging it around with more force than even an apostle could muster. Sure, Villedrucken was enchanted with restoration magic and could repair itself, but it wasn't able to heal as fast as the rigors of battle damaged it. In fact, it was a miracle it had managed to hold together for this long.

"Vierte, look at her weapon."

"I see."

While they were talking to each other, Shea vanished and reappeared behind Dritter a second later. Her Body Strengthening was on a completely different level from anything the apostles had ever seen.

“I’ll flatten you!” Shea shouted, swinging Villedrucken down with unbelievable force.

The only thing that saved Dritter from being squashed like Funfte was the fact that all apostles shared combat experience. Due to that fact, Dritter knew exactly how Funfte had died, so she simply crossed her claymores behind her instead of trying to turn around.

“Nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnngh?!”

But of course, the force of Shea’s blow was still so strong that she screamed out in pain through gritted teeth. Unable to fend her off, Dritter was forced to her knees...and then to the ground. Her claymores let out an ominous cracking noise, and Vierte knew she had to do something soon or she was dead.

“Haaah!”

With a surprisingly spirited yell, Vierte covered her swords with as much disintegration magic as possible and drove them into the cracks she’d seen on Villedrucken. She figured that if Shea lost her weapon, the apostles might stand a chance even if they were outstatted. However, she’d been far too naive.

“I knew you’d do that,” Shea said with a smile. One of Future Sight’s derivative skills was Branching Paths. While Dritter and Vierte had been talking, she’d used it to simulate what might happen if she tried attacking Dritter, and it had told her that Vierte would use this moment to attack as well.

Perfectly reading Vierte’s attack, Shea lashed out with a wicked-fast kick at her neck. Vierte was unable to react in time, and her neck let out a sickening crunch as Shea’s foot made contact. Shea then jumped into the air and did an aerial roundhouse kick with her other leg right into Vierte’s stomach, sending her flying.

However, her having to deal with Vierte gave Dritter a moment to catch her breath.

“You monster,” Dritter spat.

“I’d say thanks for the praise, but I don’t wanna be praised by you.”

Right as Shea landed, Dritter fired off a point-blank disintegration beam at her. But of course, it didn’t hit. Shea simply vanished and appeared directly underneath Dritter’s arms a second later. She then stepped forward and drove her elbow into Dritter’s stomach with bone-crushing force.

“Gah!” Dritter groaned as she doubled over, coughing up blood. But before she could recover, Shea followed up with a high kick that shattered her jaw and sent her flying into the air. She didn’t get very far though, as Shea’s hair wrapped around Dritter’s leg and dragged her back down.

“Get wrecked!” Shea shouted, bringing Villedrucken down on Dritter’s chest at the speed of sound. The hammer moved so fast that Dritter couldn’t even see it coming.

The blow struck true, obliterating Dritter’s upper half and turning her into a stain on the ground, which had cratered from the impact of Shea’s hammer.

Suddenly, a wave of burning heat washed over Shea. One of the remaining apostles had created a magic circle with their feathers and summoned a wall of flames to use as a smokescreen so they could land a surprise attack on Shea.

“That won’t work on me anymore!” Shea shouted, straining her ears. She couldn’t see through the flames, but she could definitely hear through them. Picking out her opponent easily, she swung Villedrucken into one section of the flames. But to her surprise, two figures leaped out, not one.

“Huh?!”

That was the first time her senses had been duped. It seemed Vierte had purposely let herself be detected after summoning the wall of flames to catch Shea off guard.

Moving at top speed, Hearst burst out of the flames on Shea's side, her claymore held aloft.

"Die!"

The moment Shea's hammer struck Vierte was when Hearst swung down. Not at Shea, but at her hammer. Using Vierte as bait proved effective. In the same moment that Vierte was pulverized, Villedrucken shattered into a million pieces.

The flames disappeared with Vierte's death, clearing up Shea's vision. She kept turning, the momentum of her earlier swing propelling her, while Hearst's own momentum shot her right past Shea. For a moment, the two of them were back-to-back.

Determined to defeat Shea in the only moment that she was vulnerable, Hearst planted her feet firmly on the ground. They made deep furrows, but she was able to forcibly stop her charge. She then turned around and thrust her claymore toward Shea.

Shea performed almost exactly the same maneuver to stop her momentum, turned around on a dime, and charged at Hearst.

The two of them clashed midair, blue and platinum streaks slamming into each other.

I cannot lose! Hearst thought.

Victory's mine! Shea thought at the same time.

Hearst poured as much mana as she could into her sword, determined to cut off Shea's head even through her Steel Form's protection. Her resolve was so strong, in fact, that it was hard to believe she was just a puppet. In this one moment, all she cared

about was not losing to the enemy in front of her. For once, fulfilling her lord's mission wasn't even on her mind.

However, while Hearst simply didn't want to lose, Shea wanted to *win*, which was the decisive difference between the two of them. Thus, it was inevitable that the latter would come out on top.

As the two of them drew closer, Hearst saw it all in slow motion. Red liquid started gathering in the palm of Shea's hand and began molding itself into a familiar shape, almost as if it was alive.

This was another one of Shea's metamorphosis magic spells, Crimson Warhammer. Like her Steel Form, it was metamorphosis magic that manipulated her own body, though this particular spell allowed her to control her blood.

Hearst watched in awe as blood spilled from the cut in Shea's palm and formed a warhammer. The moment of slow-motion clarity ended there, however, and the two sides clashed with a thunderous roar. After the exchange, they passed each other by and landed back-to-back once more.

Shea's hammer dissipated, turning into a flurry of bloody cherry blossoms. Yet more blood dripped from the cut on her neck, but she remained standing.

Without turning around, Hearst asked, "What is this feeling welling up within me? I feel as though there's something heavy within my chest, but at the same time, I want to scream. Shea Haulia...do you know what this feeling is?"

"It's probably disappointment, isn't it?"

"I see," Hearst muttered, nodding in understanding.

A second later, something fell from the sky and stabbed the ground between the two of them. It was the blade of Hearst's claymore. The bit she was still holding stopped right after the hilt. Moreover, there

was a massive cavity in her chest, and her core was full of cracks and crumbling away.

Hearst dropped her shattered claymore and looked over her shoulder at Shea. Relaxing her stance, Shea turned back to face her as well. To her surprise, Hearst's eyes were brimming with emotion, and she was biting her lip in frustration.

In a whisper, as if admitting it was the same as admitting defeat, she said, "I hate you."

Those words were indeed filled with hate, and also quite a bit of jealousy. Hearst fell to the ground, maintaining her hateful scowl to the bitter end. It wasn't a very fitting way to go for an apostle, but it certainly was how a "person" might meet their end.

Shea walked over to her corpse and replied in a smug voice, as if that was the true reason she had won and Hearst had lost, "Well, I *really* hate you."

She stood there for a moment, then sat on the ground and let the reality of her victory wash over her.

Eventually, a soft breeze ruffled her ears. In the distance, she could hear Tio and Freid still duking it out, but she made no move to get up and go help. Instead, she let out a long groan, since her body felt numb. At that point, moving anything was like trying to move underwater. It was a struggle just to stay awake.

"L-Level X really took a toll on me...and using Crimson Warhammer has got me feeling anemic."

While she hadn't depleted much of her mana, her insane body strengthening had clearly taken a physical toll on her. Resisting the urge to take a nap, she pulled a healing potion out of her Treasure Trove and drank it. Then, she looked up toward where Tio was doing battle.



“Guess now that I’ve taken care of the apostles, I should help Tio-san with—”

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

A series of ear-splitting roars interrupted her. Then, an unbelievable number of monsters appeared out of nowhere. There were at least a hundred thousand of them by her count.

“O-Oh shit,” Shea muttered, trying to get up. This was no time for her to rest. But unfortunately, the recoil from using Level X made it difficult for her to even stand.

As she attempted to force her body to work properly, there was a new development above. A barrage of beams shot downward...and something crashed into the ground near Shea. The dust cloud it kicked up was so thick that she couldn’t even tell what it was. For a moment she was worried it was an enemy attack, but then the wind cleared the dust away and Shea visibly paled.

“Tio...san?”

A beaten and battered Tio was in the center of the crater.

Chapter VII: Dragon God's Advent

A few minutes before Tio unceremoniously crashed next to Shea, her battle with Freid had begun to heat up.

"Tch, you're pretty tough," Freid spat. He'd initially thought that he'd be able to wear Tio down pretty quickly, but her defenses had held out for far longer than he'd anticipated.

For her part, Tio was continuing to turn Freid's monsters to her side, heedless of the damage she took. Her blood and scales littered every inch of the battlefield, but she'd gotten even faster at transforming his monsters into her dragons, so she suddenly had quite a sizable army. They'd formed up around her to prevent Freid's monsters from forcing her into a melee. That allowed her to focus purely on Freid and Uranos...and avoid any attacks that might instantly kill her. Furthermore, any time they tried to charge up bigger attacks to wipe out her army, she skillfully interrupted them with Dragon Claws or her Obsidian Dominator. And, of course, any dragon that was injured was quickly healed with Dragon Queen's Grace. She was also constantly healing herself as well to make sure she never got so injured that it affected her mobility.

Freid may have called her fighting style pathetic, but the current situation was proving more than anything that her tactics were effective. Plus, she wasn't just relying on her sturdiness either; she was using her knowledge and experience to accurately predict Freid's moves even without the help of Shea's Future Sight.

Loath though he was to admit it, Freid had to accept that Tio was both wiser and stronger than he'd expected.

However, Tio wasn't winning as handily as Freid might have thought.

I'll be running out of antidotes soon. Once that happens, it will be more difficult to reduce the amount of damage I take.

While Tio could usually stop Freid and Uranos before they fired off any big attacks, their smaller blows were harder to counter. Freid's portals and Uranos's breath made for a deadly combination that even Tio was impressed by. Sometimes, it was Uranos himself who teleported while Freid fired off disintegration beams and feather barrages. To top it off, Freid could also fire off regular elemental magic to slow Tio down and make Uranos's breath attacks hit home.

Perfectly dodging everything was nigh impossible. There were more than a few times Tio simply had to take a hit. And the more of Uranos's breath attacks she took head-on, the more her healing magic was impaired, forcing her to drink more of her precious supply of CheatMate Drinks. As soon as she was out, things would get dicey. Her mana supply wasn't limitless either. Both her Dragon Queen's Edict and Dragon Queen's Grace took a decent amount of mana to use, despite her stellar affinity for metamorphosis and spirit magic. Her breath attacks and scale armor took up mana as well.

At this rate, she would run out of resources before she turned the tide. Freid understood that as well, which was why he wasn't letting his impatience get to him. Despite losing two hundred of his monsters, he was sticking to his plan. Though admittedly, it was extremely frustrating seeing Tio's fighting spirit remain unshaken even after all the attacks he'd hit her with.

Picking up on Freid's annoyance, Tio easily read his next attack and somersaulted forward. A second later, a giant pair of jaws closed around where she'd been standing. Uranos had teleported inside her formation to attack her from behind. However, while upside down, she formed her fingers into the shape of a gun and fired a highly compressed breath beam at Uranos. She'd also correctly predicted that Uranos would turn her way after realizing he'd missed, so her beam shot straight through his right eye.

“Graaaaaaaaah!”

Tio's compressed breath attack was powerful enough to break through Uranos's spatial barrier, and for the very first time, Tio managed to land a crippling blow on the dragon. However, that also caused Uranos's anger to reach a boiling point. Enraged, Uranos ignored his pain and roared at Tio, using an absolutely insane amount of mana to convert his roar into a wide-area breath attack.

A wall of light barreled toward her. Goosebumps rose on her arms...and for the first time, she felt a hint of panic. She hurriedly flapped her wings and darted out of the way. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to get completely clear in time.

"Nnnnnnnnng, now that stings!"

A familiar pain lanced through Tio's right shoulder, and one of her wings was blown away. The skin beneath her scales was scalded, and a section of the scales themselves was blown off. Still, Tio didn't let the pain stop her. Instead, she created a foothold for herself with Aerodynamic, then used telepathy to direct one of her dragons to fire a breath attack at the space behind her.

"Tch, you really are perceptive," Freid spat, hurriedly dodging out of the way. He'd teleported in to hit Tio with a surprise attack, but her dragon's breath had gone right where he'd tried to attack from.

"You're simply too easy to read!" Tio replied, lashing out at Freid with her whip. The split ends made it hard for Freid to track all of their movements, and as Tio had expected, Uranos flew in at surprising speed to block the blow with his scales. In the meantime, Tio regenerated her wing and scales, then also used recovery magic on herself. However, the damage to her shoulder was slow to heal. She'd simply taken too many hits.

"To think you still had enough strength left to take one of Uranos's eyes..." Freid muttered, frowning.

The breath attack Tio had hit Uranos with had been her strongest yet. Freid couldn't understand where she was drawing that power from when her mana, body, and mind should have been exhausted. Only now was Freid beginning to realize that dragonmen's toughness extended to far more than just their physical stamina. Freid coldly reassessed Tio as he healed Uranos's eye.

"How many more of those potions do you have left?" he asked.

"Who knows?" Tio said, downing another CheatMate Drink. She obviously wasn't going to let him know that was the last one.

Curses! Even after enduring all that, I still haven't reached the point needed to activate the spell! Why did my ancestor have to make such a convoluted activation condition?! Couldn't you have been nicer to your descendants?!

Only by enduring enough pain could Tio activate her final trump card. The unexpected power-up she'd received when she'd returned home—the legacy of the first Klarus. She couldn't help but complain a little though, since it seemed she still wasn't close to hitting the activation condition. Still, she wanted to avoid using that trump card if possible. That way, she could use it to help Hajime in his fight against Ehit. But in order to win without it, she needed more time.

In an attempt to buy that time, Tio asked, "By the way, where are the rest of the demons? Didn't they all come with you to the Sanctuary?"

It was a strange question to be asking in the middle of a battlefield, especially since Tio didn't have any real attachment to Freid's countrymen. Fearing some kind of trap, Freid warily eyed her without responding.

"Come now, the end is near. Why not take a short break?"

Both sides needed to focus on healing, so it wasn't a bad suggestion to talk about something in the meantime. While she spoke, Tio glanced around the battlefield. In truth, she'd been wondering for

some time now where all the demons were. At the very least, she'd expected to find Freid's soldiers with him. After all, no loyal soldier would abandon their general in combat.

"You're not going to ask any of them for help?"

It had been a simple question, but Freid took it to mean that she thought he wasn't strong enough to win on his own, so he narrowed his eyes dangerously.

"There's no need to worry; my comrades won't be coming to aid me."

"Oh? Why not? Wouldn't it be easier if they fought with you?"

"They are all sleeping in a different part of my lord's domain. They need to be imbued with his strength before we reach our destination so that they can serve as his vanguard in the invasion of the new world."

"So they're being strengthened just like you, huh?"

Tio had only started this conversation to buy time, but now she'd learned something quite disturbing. Fortunately, it seemed things weren't quite as bad as she feared.

"They're being given power befitting their new status as God's chosen people. Though, they haven't been granted the right to become one of his arbiters as I have."

"Arbiter? Not apostle?"

"My lord has graciously chosen me to serve as Alvaheit-sama's successor. He has forgiven me for calling him a false god back when I was ignorant and knew nothing and allowed me to become his most trusted retainer."

"I understand now. The power you wield and the strength of your familiars stem from the fact that you were granted strength above even that of an apostle."

"That's right. I shall become a new god serving under Lord Ehit, thus making my people the people of God."

In that moment, Freid's frown turned into an expression of pure ecstasy. Even Tio, the world's biggest pervert, was disgusted by that expression. But at the same time, she felt a twinge of pity for Freid.

Back at the Schnee Snow Fields, Tio had asked him why he'd chosen to follow Ehit after conquering one of the labyrinths and learning the truth. After all, it was Ehit who'd orchestrated the war that had led to the deaths of so many of his people.

"I feel sorry for the demons who died knowing nothing about the cause they fought for. Do you not care at all about them, or your homeland, anymore?"

The reason Tio had specified "anymore" was because she believed that Freid had at least cared about his people before. She knew the look in his eyes too well. He had the same crazed look that the people who had killed her parents and slaughtered her countrymen had once had. But before Ehit had driven them mad, they had been neighbors and friends, people Tio had known and liked, hence why Tio was certain Freid had also been the kind of man who cared about his people before Ehit had changed him.

No one could conquer a labyrinth with half-hearted resolve, especially not the Frost Caverns, as clearing that required defeating your own negative emotions. A crazed zealot wouldn't have been able to surmount that trial. Or at least, that was what Tio believed.

"Don't be ridiculous," Freid replied. "I *do* love my people and my country. I am their guardian. However, my lord's will takes precedence over everything else. That's all there is to it."

The casualness with which he said he'd throw away everything important to him if Ehit asked was terrifying. Even Uranos's eyes wavered upon hearing that.

Just then, Freid and Tio turned to look into the distance.

“What?!” Freid exclaimed.

“Oho, it seems she’s reached the final level,” Tio said.

Both of them were staring at a pillar of pale-blue mana that was shooting up to the heavens. The sheer amount of power exuding from that pillar was awe-inspiring. And every time the pillar pulsed, the power contained within it grew. Freid watched with disbelief as the five apostles were overwhelmed by a single person. His earlier ecstatic expression was nowhere to be found.

“Impossible... The apostles are losing? That can’t be. The first five were personally given more strength than any other by our lord!”

“Why are you so surprised?”

Freid had been so stunned that for a moment he’d forgotten about Tio. He quickly returned to his senses and turned back to face her.

“She’s a member of the weakest, most cowardly race,” Tio said. “Not only that, but she’s just sixteen. A year ago, no one even knew who she was, but now she’s conquered the labyrinths and can hold her own on battlefields like this one. Surely you must have realized how exceptional she is well before now.”

“Yes, but...”

“She has no affinity for magic, nor did she have any combat experience until she started traveling with Master. She doesn’t belong to a naturally powerful race like the dragonmen or vampires. And yet, she’s made it this far through the sheer strength of her will. After Master, Shea Haulia is undoubtedly the world’s strongest monster,” Tio proclaimed, brimming with pride as she talked about Shea. “As if a few slightly strengthened puppets made by a so-called god who thinks he’s better than everyone would stand a chance against her.”

Freid seethed when Tio insulted Ehit, but as he watched Shea utterly dominate the apostles, he lost the will to retort.

“Impossible...” he muttered, then turned back to Tio. The only way to overturn this situation was to defeat the enemy in front of him and go to the apostles’ aid.

“I need to help the apostles. I’m done toying with you. It’s time you died.”

“There’s no need to be so hasty. The real battle is just beginning.”

“Enough with your boasts. Your plan won’t work. The difference in numbers is too large to change in time.”

Freid was confident he’d seen through Tio’s strategy. And so, he raised his hand, ready to bring an end to this charade. The moment he brought it down would be the moment of Tio’s execution.

He still had three times as many familiars as Tio did, and he’d confirmed during their conversation that Tio’s recovery speed was slowly dropping. He could see burned skin peeking out from the ripped sections of Tio’s kimono near her waist, she wasn’t able to replenish her scale armor as quickly as she had before, the wound on her shoulder wasn’t fully healed either, and though she put on an air of composure, sweat was visibly pouring down her forehead.

It was clear to Freid that she was nearing her limits. He was absolutely confident now that he’d be able to destroy her before she converted enough of his familiars.

On the other hand, Uranos’s eye had been fully healed, and the dragon let out a triumphant roar. However, Tio just smiled bewitchingly and said, “When did I ever say these dragons were the only ones I had?”

In a commanding voice that echoed even to the depths of hell, the dragon queen declared, “By the power vested in me, I command you to resurrect—Dragon Queen’s Call!”

Tio’s black mana surged up from the ground below. Or more specifically, it surged out of all of the dead monsters that were littering the battlefield. And a second later, their corpses started writhing. They began transforming into dragons, the same way monsters Tio captured with Dragon Queen’s Edict had.

“Impossible...”

“It isn’t just this Obsidian Dominator that can transform creatures into dragons. Just how much of my blood and how many of my scales do you think I’ve scattered across this battlefield?”

“I see. You used your own flesh and blood as a medium...but...”

Freid hadn’t anticipated this. There was so much of her crimson blood staining the ground and monsters below that it looked like a scene out of hell. And now, all the monsters there were returning from the underworld to fight for their new master. They raised their heads to face the sky and let out a series of roars. It really did look as though the gates of hell had just been thrown open.

As the field of monsters were turned into corpse dragons, they took flight with their new wings and headed up to their master.

Dragon Queen’s Call was a mixed spirit and metamorphosis magic spell. Tio had analyzed her own genetics enough to replicate pseudo-dragon souls with spirit magic, then had combined that with the transformation metamorphosis magic spell to give corpses artificial life and turn them into dragons.

The duplicate souls Tio had imbued them with were temporary, however, and once the magic wore off, they would return to being corpses. In that sense, they were more like golems than organic beings. Still, she had in one instant summoned up an army of

powerful dragons to bolster her ranks. With all the undead dragons at her back, she looked like the ruler of the underworld.

“How repulsive,” Freid spat.

“Ha ha ha, it’s a fitting spell, wouldn’t you say? After all, I am the woman of the man everyone calls the new Demon Lord.”

The irony of that wasn’t lost on Freid, the man who’d served the previous Demon Lord.

Tio grinned wickedly at her foe. When she’d shown her new magic to Hajime, he’d responded with, “Wow, recycling the enemies you’ve killed and bringing them back as allies is super efficient.”

Instead of being put off or disgusted, he’d praised her. Not only that, but he’d been genuinely jealous of her ingenuity. As a result, Tio didn’t feel at all ashamed of her rather brutal new magic. In fact, she was proud of it. Though it did look like Freid and Uranos, both of whom were clad in pure white with seraphic wings, were the ones fighting to save the world now instead of Tio, who had her pitch-black mana and an undead army behind her.

“Now then, celebrate the moment of your birth as dragons would...with a roar!” Tio commanded, and all of her dragons—the armored ones, the ones she’d converted, and the ones she’d revived—fired off breath attacks with a series of roars. Freid’s familiars screamed in pain as they were lanced through by the barrage of black beams.

At long last, Tio had turned the tide.

There were only four hundred of Freid’s familiars left after the initial barrage, whereas Tio had eight hundred dragons. The reversal Freid had believed impossible had come to pass.

“Well? Your army isn’t looking too great anymore.”

Though she was covered in wounds, Tio looked every bit like a dragon queen as she stood proudly at the head of her black dragon army.

Freid cast his gaze over the battlefield. He then turned back to Tio and sneered at her. It was an ugly sneer, full of scorn and derision. From his perspective, Tio had simply struggled in vain to grasp at a hope that wasn't real.

"I told you before—your plan won't work," he replied. Then, he raised his hand once more...and the obelisk at the center of the island began to glow, shooting a pillar of light into the air. Similar pillars of light soon shot up from other floating islands in the distance. It seemed there was more than one obelisk in this dimension.

"Now this might be a problem..." Tio mumbled, a coy smile on her face.

She was pretty sure she knew exactly what those pillars of light signified. And a few seconds later, her prediction turned into reality.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

A horde of monsters appeared in the sky and let out a resounding roar. There were so many of them that they covered the sky. And not just the sky above this island either, but the entire sky of this dimension. A few of them looked to be as strong as the Leviathan, even.

Freid's new army was too large to count. Trying would have been like trying to count the number of stars in the sky. All Tio could say for sure was that there were at least a million of them.

"These monsters are all residents of the Sanctuary. They aren't my familiars."

After becoming Ehit's Arbiter, Freid had been granted the authority to use a few of the Sanctuary's functions, including the ability to control its monsters and summon them from the other dimensions within the Sanctuary. This was why he had remained confident he would win no matter what.

"I wanted to defeat you with my own strength, but my pride means nothing compared to the importance of the mission. Regrettable though it may be, I'll use everything at my disposal to eliminate you."

There was a mixture of frustration and ecstatic rapture in Freid's darkened eyes.

"Are you prepared to die, Tio Klarus? This is the end!"

He swung his hand down...and the army of monsters surged toward Tio and her dragons. Her black dragons valiantly tried to defend her, but fighting against the army was like trying to push against the tide. In the same way that man couldn't oppose the might of nature, the dragons quickly started dropping.

There are simply too many of them. My Dragon Queen's Grace won't be able to keep up.

Tio dodged Uranos's breath and slowed Freid down with her whip, then quickly glanced down to see how Shea was holding up. From the looks of it, she'd defeated the apostles, but wouldn't be able to move for a bit. If the monster army went after her, she wouldn't stand a chance...and it was entirely possible Freid would send a number of them down to take her out.

Gah, there's no end to this! But if this truly is the full might of Ehit's army, then perhaps it's worth using my trump card here after all!

After a moment of deliberation, Tio decided that now was indeed the time. Unfortunately, she still hadn't managed to store enough power to use it, though she was close.

There's no other way. I'll just have to risk it! I have to be brave!

Tio abandoned the plan of slowly building up controlled amounts of damage and decided to risk an all-or-nothing play. If it was to protect Shea, her friend, she'd gladly take the risk.

"Come, Uranos! Let us decide once and for all if my breath is stronger than yours!"

Uranos turned and saw Tio gathering her pitch-black mana around her outstretched hands. With how much she was compressing into that one attack, it really did look like she was betting it all on one contest.

Uranos was more than happy to comply. Sparks ran down his entire body as he opened his maw and began charging his own breath attack. A whirlpool of light gathered in front of his mouth. He charged his breath seven times, and by then it was so dazzlingly bright that it blinded Tio.

The two of them loosed at the same time, just like when Tio and Uranos had fought a breath duel back in the Grand Gruen Volcano. However, the results this time were different. Tio's breath was immediately blown away, almost as if she hadn't put anything into the attack to begin with. She immediately crossed her arms in front of her and tucked her knees in, taking a fully defensive posture. But of course, that wouldn't be enough to block Uranos's ultimate breath attack. However, that wasn't what Tio was trying to do.

"Huh?! Uranos, wait, don't—!"

Realizing too late that he'd been duped, Freid called for his partner to stop. He didn't know exactly what Tio was planning, but he didn't like the determined look in her eyes.

Of course, Uranos wasn't able to stop his attack on such short notice, so his breath swallowed Tio whole. The beam of light shot perfectly horizontally through the sky, obliterating all the monsters in its path

and causing massive damage to any caught in the radius of its shockwaves. And yet—

“Nnnnnnnnnnnnnngh!” Tio screamed in pain, but continued to withstand the burning light. It stripped away her scales with its devastating might, so she gritted her teeth as searing pain lanced through her unguarded body. The pain was enough to drive anyone else insane.

Tio could tell the edges of her body were being ground away by the light, and that she was slowly inching closer and closer to death. This was nothing like the joyous pain Hajime granted her while doling out “punishment.” Her body was literally being eroded away, and her primal instincts were telling her to escape. And yet, Tio continued to withstand the pain and hang on to consciousness by a hair’s breadth...until finally—

It's time.

She reached the threshold. Tio immediately used some of the mana she'd gathered but hadn't fired earlier to use another breath attack and blow herself out of Uranos's breath. However, she didn't have enough strength left to control her fall, so she tumbled to the ground, white smoke coming off every inch of her body. She then hit the ground with the force of a cannonball, kicking up a cloud of dust around her.

“Tio...san?” Shea's trembling voice asked, prompting Tio to shoot her friend a smile. She was glad she'd made it before the monsters started attacking Shea, but she also felt bad that she'd made Shea worry about her.

Thus, the dragonman kept her tone light and replied, “Yep, it's...me... Gah! The pervert everyone knows...and loves... Gack!”

“This isn’t the time for jokes! You look half-dead! Besides, no one likes you in pervert mode, Tio-san! The whole world thinks you’re creepy!”

“N-No one...likes my perverse ways? Amazing! Nothing hits the spot like an insult from your comrades! Haaah... Haaah...!”

Shea had been trying to feed Tio a healing potion, but seeing Tio enjoy getting insulted even in this situation was so off-putting that she backed away and gave her a sad look.

Fortunately, backing away was the right move, as a single white feather slammed into the ground where Shea had been crawling a second ago.

“Ow!” Shea yelped, dropping the healing potion. The feather had still grazed her hand, though it was little more than a scratch. The vial hit the ground and shattered, spilling its contents. Looking up at where the feather had come from, Shea saw Freid riding Uranos. The horde of monsters was so thick that no light was getting through from the sky above anymore. Some of them alighted on the ground around Tio and Shea, blocking them off horizontally as well. It looked like a writhing cloud of darkness was giving birth to monsters with how many of them there were and how they came down in streams.

“Your precious black dragons have run away. It looks like you don’t even have the strength left to control your familiars.”

Freid looked down at Tio as if she was nothing more than a pebble on the road.

“This is what happens to fools who oppose God. Die knowing that you fought in vain.”

Shea opened her mouth to argue back, but before she could, Tio started laughing maniacally.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha—gh—ha ha ha ha!”

Shea turned back to Tio, then breathed a sigh of relief. She could tell from the look in Tio's eyes that she'd purposely taken that last attack, so this was all part of the plan.

On the other hand, Freid glared at her in annoyance and asked, "Have you finally lost your mind?"

"I'm perfectly sane...don't worry. It's just so funny...how...confident you are... He he..."

Tio looked like an absolute mess, and her smile made her look even more ghastly, but she was so lively that it was hard to imagine she was on the verge of death. Moreover, the powerful resolve in her eyes hadn't diminished one bit. Her slit-like draconic golden eyes stared right through Freid, and he unconsciously shrank back a little. The bad feeling he'd gotten right before Uranos's breath hit her was getting even worse, and he felt a chill run down his spine.

"What can you possibly do in that state?" Freid asked. It sounded like derision, but at the same time, he couldn't stand not knowing what was causing those chills.

Tio got to her feet, blood dripping from all over her body. Her tattered kimono was still barely covering the bits that mattered most, but her limbs were all bare. They were in an awful state too, with the flesh shorn away and the bones visible. Tio's entire body creaked every time she moved. However, her confident smile was that of one who knew she still ruled the skies.

"Let's put an end to this. You've lost," Tio declared, pointing up at Freid all the while. A pulse of power then spread throughout the entire dimension, and all of the monsters momentarily stopped, as did Freid and Uranos. They all felt like they were suddenly staring up at a towering mountain. They watched on as a surge of black mana greater than any before erupted from Tio, not even realizing that they were unconsciously backing away. Instinctively, they knew that

if they looked away from her for even a moment, they'd be obliterated.

Fear and awe washed over them. Just one pulse was enough to terrify them and make Tio seem like a looming monster, so naturally, the second pulse had an even more striking effect. As it washed over the monsters, pockets of them started tumbling to the ground, with those already on land collapsing. They couldn't handle the overwhelming pressure Tio was releasing.

Then, the third pulse went out. The weakest of the Sanctuary's monsters turned tail and fled when faced with its power. And it was at this point that Freid finally snapped back to his senses. As much as he didn't want to believe it, he could clearly tell that the amount of power rolling off Tio far surpassed that of even his greatest creation, Uranos. Worst of all, her strength was still growing. In fact, the pressure was so suffocating that Freid's entire body shivered in trepidation. His instincts were telling him he needed to get as far away from Tio as possible.

Wh-What's happening? She should be on the verge of death! And yet...she's as terrifying as that Irregular!

Tio picked up Shea, who was still having a hard time moving properly. Seeing Shea's relieved expression was what made Freid finally realize that he may truly have been on the verge of defeat.

Shea turned to Freid and grinned at him while giving him the middle finger. Meanwhile, Tio stood surprisingly straight, her wounds seemingly not hurting her at all, and put a hand to her chest. In a quiet, somewhat reverent voice she muttered, "Thank you, ancestor."

"Ngh, attack! Don't let her do whatever she's about to do! Kill her now!" Freid shouted, angry at his own cowardice. He couldn't believe he'd been so overwhelmed that he'd actually given his opponent time to prepare her attack. He should have been

bombarding her with constant blows to keep her busy and unable to set up whatever she was doing. Sadly, it was too late for regrets. Besides, though he didn't know it, the result would have been the same regardless.

Uranos and the divine beast-tier monsters responded as fast as they could to Freid's command, but it wasn't fast enough.

"Behold," Tio proclaimed as a rush of aurora breath attacks, gravity blasts, spatial shockwaves, and powerful lightning attacks rushed toward her. Not a single one of them reached her, however.

Tio's mana transformed from pure jet-black to the glittering black of a starry night sky. It spiraled up from her in a resplendent pillar, deflecting any and all attacks, while also obliterating any monsters that happened to be directly above her.

Dumbfounded, Freid inadvertently took a few steps back. But just then, a booming, solemn voice echoed throughout the entire dimension.

"This is the pinnacle of power that I, Tio Klarus, have reached."

As Tio's mana reached the zenith of its ascent, it spread outward in waves, covering the sky like a veil of night.

"Impossible... You can control the weather?" Freid muttered. Strictly speaking, that wasn't exactly what Tio was doing. Rather, she was creating weather from nothing.

A second later, flames filled the sky. They spread out to cover the dark canopy Tio had created, and within seconds, the entire dimension was dyed a flaming red. Tio had turned the sea of clouds into a sea of flames.

That was otherworldly enough as it was, but she wasn't done yet. Tio then added lightning to her flaming sea, creating a roiling storm of death.

The roar of flames and the crackle of thunder drowned out all other noises. The monsters in the storm's path were brutally, mercilessly, helplessly cut down without even a chance to defend themselves. Most of them had started panicking and trampling each other already, but Tio was just getting started.

Suddenly, there was a deafening boom...and Freid caught a glimpse of some giant *thing* waiting within the storm of flames and lightning. He saw it for only the briefest of moments, but he knew for sure he'd seen something covered in black scales.

"What...? What is that?"

There was, of course, no one who dared to answer his question. But at that moment, the creature swimming in the sea of fire and lightning revealed itself.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

With a roar that seemed to rip through the very fabric of reality, a massive dragon with scales black as the night flew out of the storm, clad in a nimbus of fire and lightning. It was long and serpentine, like an Oriental dragon instead of a more traditional Western one. In fact, it looked more like the Leviathan that Hajime and the others had fought earlier than any dragon on Tortus. However, it was twice as large as the Leviathan had been. Moreover, it was a thousand times more imposing.

The black dragon—though it was so far above and beyond other dragons, even Uranos, that it was probably more fitting to call it a black dragon god—was, of course, Tio Klarus herself.

This was Tio's ultimate spell—Dragon God's Advent. It was the true nature of the power Tio had gained upon conquering the grudge remaining within the scale left behind by the very first Klarus. In exchange for amplifying the user's destructive impulses and robbing

them of all reason, it granted them enough power to transform into a dragon god.

After a fierce mental battle, Tio had mastered the scale and absorbed only its strengthening aspects without losing her reason. She'd then shaped that power to make sure the transformation put her in a form that suited her best. However, it took an enormous amount of power to activate this final transformation with the rage fueling it gone. Artifacts and evolution magic weren't enough, which was why Tio had continued to endure Freid's attacks. She'd been using the derivative skill of Draconification that only she possessed, Pain Conversion, to turn all the damage she received into energy. By pushing herself to the brink of death, Tio had finally stored enough power to activate the transformation.

This transformation worked similarly to Limit Break, massively boosting her mana reserves and increasing her stats over tenfold. As a result, Tio could now wield the almighty thunder magic of her ancestor, as well as her own specialties—wind and fire magic—which had been upgraded. She could cast spells of those three elements as much as she wanted without depleting her mana, and control any magic of that element within a five-kilometer radius around her. She could also control the weather around her and even freely change the shape and size of her transformation. Furthermore, she could use ancient magic with greater precision and strength than ever before.

She truly was fit to be called the dragon god. Unfortunately, she hadn't practiced this transformation enough, so she could only keep it active for a minute. Plus, once it was over, she'd be as drained as Shea.

All that means is I need to end this fight within one minute!

She coiled around herself, her golden dragon eyes looking down on the remaining monsters. Most of them lost the will to fight just from

that. Uranos roared in defiance, but even his eyes were clouded with fear.

Tio then let out another roar...and fire and lightning rained down on the swarm of monsters. Flaming tornadoes also rose from the ground, whipping up gale-force winds around them. Back on Earth, they would have been classified as F5 tornadoes. Entire clumps of monsters were sucked into the tornadoes, then reduced to ash by the blisteringly hot flames.

"Impossible! Impossible! Impossible! Impossible! Impossible! Impossible! This can't be happening!" Freid shouted as lightning crashed down around him and tornadoes stripped away all the monsters surrounding him.

Tio had called herself the new Demon Lord's woman, and it truly was a fitting moniker for the person who'd brought hell itself right into God's domain.

Freid's overly zealous faith couldn't accept that Ehit's authority was being overwhelmed in such a manner. Tearing out his own hair, he turned to his greatest creation and shouted, "Stop her, Uranos! Someone like her cannot be allowed to exiiiiiiiiiiiiiiist!"

"Graaaaaaaaaah!"

With a roar, Uranos flew off toward Tio. He then opened his maw wide and fired off the strongest breath attack he could. However, even his strongest attack was hopelessly outclassed.

"This is the end for you, white dragon."

Tio fired off a breath attack of her own, and this time, it was hers that won out. White and black clashed for only a second before the black came out on top, swallowing up Uranos along with his breath attack. Uranos wasn't even given time to scream.

The beam shot straight through one of the floating islands down below, blowing a good chunk of it away, and continued onward to push below the sea of clouds. All that remained was the upper half of Uranos's body, which was now broken on the ground next to where Tio's breath attack had passed through.

"Ura...nos?" Freid muttered in disbelief, staggering backward through the air. However, no matter how many times he called out to his beloved partner, there was no reply...nor could he feel anything from his bond with Uranos.

When the reality of what had happened finally sank in, Freid screamed, "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

He didn't even care that his millions of monsters were being wiped out at an unbelievable rate. Instead, he beat his pure-white wings and rose high into the sky. In that moment, he was so enraged that he didn't even care about Ehit's orders or what his faith demanded of him. And so, he unleashed the strongest disintegration beam he could at Tio while firing off as many spatial blasts as possible, not even caring if the excess burden fried his brain.

"Fool," Tio said, though there was no contempt in her voice. It sounded rather cold, but there was a hint of pity in it. She then let out a roar, dispersing all of Freid's attacks.

"Gah!"

As Tio's roar washed over Freid, he felt as though he'd been shaken to his very core, making him involuntarily stiffen up.

A second later, a bolt of lightning shot down at him. He tumbled to the ground, unable to even redeploy his wings. As he fell, he stretched a hand out toward Tio, who was flying far above his reach. Freid hit the ground hard, bouncing a few times before coming to a stop. As he went flat on his back, he watched as his prized army of monsters was reduced to a number he could easily count.

He realized now that this was the end. His rage leached out of him, leaving him feeling empty.

Thoughts like, *I'm God's Arbiter; I can't give up here*, and *At the very least, I should be prepared to take her down with me as I die a martyr*, flitted through his head, but he remained in place. It wasn't that he was too hurt to move; it was just that he couldn't muster the willpower to try.

"Do you have any last words?" Tio asked in a rumbling voice as she looked down at him.

"I..."

Freid looked like he was about to say something, but in the end, he trailed off, unable to find the words. Instead, he simply shook his head, looking as though he'd given up on everything.

Tio said nothing more. There was a high-pitched whine as she gathered her night-black mana, and she fired a beam down at him.

Though that beam was dark enough to suck in the surrounding light, it also glimmered like a starry sky. Freid looked up at the light of his doom, enchanted.

"Hm?" Tio muttered...and suddenly, something jumped in front of Freid.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

With a pained roar, Uranos bodily blocked Tio's breath attack for Freid.

"Uranos!" Freid exclaimed. His beloved familiar should have already died. And yet, despite having only half of his body left, Uranos had coated his entire body in aurora light and was holding back Tio's breath attack. While he was still slowly being burned away, considering the fact that Tio's first attack had instantly bisected him,

it was truly surprising that he was holding out at all. He was squeezing out every drop of his remaining life to protect his master.

As he was slowly burned away, Uranos turned to look at Freid. With the bond between familiar and master broken, Freid couldn't hear Uranos's words no matter what kind of metamorphosis magic he used. And yet, he could clearly tell what Uranos was saying.

"You want me to run?"

The look in Uranos's eyes made it clear that he wouldn't let his master die, no matter what.

In that moment, Freid thought back to why he'd volunteered to brave his first labyrinth, way back when he'd just been a regular soldier and not a general.

All I wanted was to save my people...to provide them a safe haven where they had nothing to fear, no war to fight... I simply wanted to be their guardian...so when did it all go wrong? When did I start putting the will of God above the safety of my own people?

Uranos was slowly being pushed back, so he glared at Freid, who was making absolutely no move to run.

After struggling desperately through the labyrinth and nearly dying dozens of times, the first monster Freid had turned into his familiar after acquiring metamorphosis magic had been Uranos. They'd been inseparable ever since. Even though that last attack should have killed Uranos, he'd somehow defied all logic and squeezed out the last of his strength to protect Freid. Even without magic to tie him to his master, their bond was still as strong as ever. And Freid had originally had a similar bond with all of his comrades.

He'd once had comrades who'd fought and died for a war that had been set up by the same god he now served. Upon realizing that, Freid shook his head. He'd finally returned to being the demon army's top general instead of Ehit's Arbiter.

“I’m sorry, but we’ll die together, partner.”

“Scraaaw!”

That tiny roar almost sounded like a, “If that’s what you want...”

“Could it be that you two have finally—?”

“The time for words has passed,” Freid said, interrupting Tio. He then reached a hand out toward the obelisk, and though he couldn’t quite touch it, it still began to glow.

“Very well, then. I shall make your death swift and painless.”

A second later, Tio’s night-black breath swallowed up Uranos and Freid. Not a trace of them remained, and Tio had no way of knowing what Freid had tried to do at the very end there...or perhaps succeeded in doing. However, judging by the resigned expression he’d had at the very end, like a mass murderer facing the punishment he knew he deserved, Tio doubted he’d been trying one last futile struggle. Or perhaps he had, but only to ensure Tio wouldn’t hold back against him.

No, I must just be overthinking things... Tio thought to herself as she stared at the spot where Freid and Uranos had just been.

“Had you not let yourselves be led astray by Ehit, you would have made a truly splendid pair.”

Tio didn’t regret killing Freid and Uranos one bit. However, they’d revealed themselves as worthy foes at the very end, so she wanted to give them the respect they deserved.

“I, Tio Klarus, shall never forget your final moments,” she said, offering a small prayer for their souls.

Chapter VIII: Unexpected Aid

"Tio-san, isn't your time about to run out?" Shea asked via telepathy. She was currently nestled inside one of the scales on Tio's neck. She'd been transferred there the same way Tio had transferred all of the equipment she'd been wearing when she transformed.

"Yes, I can't maintain this form much longer. Let us clear up the remaining enemies as quickly as possible!" Tio replied. She had, at most, ten more seconds before her transformation ran out.

The monster army had been reduced to a hundredth of its size, and there were barely even ten thousand of them left. Tio could wipe them out with ease. As she whipped up more fire tornadoes and flaming thunderstorms, she let out a triumphant roar and began gathering as much mana as she could around her. That roar also stopped the monsters that were trying to flee in their tracks, and they looked up at the massive black circle Tio had created above her. That circle shrank down to a tiny point, and Tio created yet another circle, which she again shrank down. She repeated that process multiple times, and the air around her began to rumble.

She paused for a moment as she finished charging, then unleashed a spherical burst of breath so powerful it obliterated all sound. Her night-black mana covered every inch of the floating island dimension, destroying anything and everything in sight. No monster was able to escape Tio's wrath, nor could they do anything to defend against it. Every living creature within range was immediately and utterly annihilated.

Eventually, the wave of destruction came to an end.

"Ngh, I... I'm at my limit," Tio groaned, and the storm of fire and lightning that had covered the sky suddenly vanished. The fire tornadoes also petered out, as did the flames that had been burning through all the monsters on the islands.

There was a burst of black mana from Tio's body, and her dragon form dispersed, spitting both her and Shea out into the sky. Naturally, as a result, the two of them started falling.

"T-Tio-san! We're still in the air!"

"Oh, curses. I don't have the strength left to stop our descent. Shea, help me out."

"Are you kidding me?! I don't have any strength left either!"

It would have been better if Tio had landed before canceling her transformation, but she really had been at her absolute limit. She couldn't have held out longer even if she'd tried.

"Heh, fret not. We can simply have one of my dragon familiars pick us up."

"Oh yeah; I forgot about them!"

"Come, my black dragons. Rescue ussssss."

Unfortunately, Tio's dragons didn't respond. She'd ordered them to evacuate far away from the battlefield when she'd transformed to make sure they didn't get caught up in her attack, which was also why Freid had thought they'd run away after she'd been hit by Uranos's breath.

Shea and Tio exchanged glances. Upon realizing that the black dragons were too far away to save them, both of them went pale, their expressions stiff.

"Nooooooooo! We finally won! I don't wanna die like thiiiiiiis!" Shea wailed.

"The Skyboards! Shea, get out your Skyboard!"

"I don't have the strength to even grab it!"

"Neither do I! But what if you summon it right below us so we land on it?!"

“Guess that’s our only choice!”

Sure, both Tio and Shea were too exhausted to move, but Tio was fully drained of mana, while Shea still had a little bit left. It wasn’t enough to grab Tio and Aerodynamic safely to the ground, but it was enough to summon and activate a Skyboard.



However, it was a difficult feat to properly summon it at the right spot when they were falling at such speed, with the wind buffeting them this way and that. Shea desperately called her Skyboard, but because it was unaffected by air resistance, it slipped past them like a floating leaf.

“Ah...” both of them mumbled at the same time.

“Hajime-saaan, Yue-saaaaaan, I love you twoooooo!”

“This isn’t the time to be saying your farewells! Don’t worry; I’m sure we’re strong enough to survive the fall!”

Just then, Shea and Tio heard a high-pitched squeak.

“Kyuu!”

A furry white figure streaked toward the two of them, grabbed them both by the arms, and suspended them in the air with a jolt. While the two of them felt their arms nearly be ripped out of their sockets, their fall was mercifully stopped a scant five meters from the ground. The furry white rabbit had saved their lives.

“Inaba?! You’re Inaba, aren’t you?!” Shea exclaimed.

“Did you say Inaba?! Why is he here?!” Tio shouted.

“Kyuu!”

Inaba had apparently grabbed on to Shea’s and Tio’s arms with his long bunny ears and then used Aerodynamic to halt their descent. However, their body weight had nearly ripped Inaba’s ears off, so he was trembling in pain as he held them, tears welling up in his eyes. Nevertheless, he had most definitely saved them. Inaba kicked off against the air and gradually lowered Shea and Tio to the ground.

“Th-Thank you. We owe you our lives, Inaba,” Tio said gratefully.

“Thanks a lot, Inaba. But wait, what are you doing here?”

“Kyüu, kyuu! Kyu?”

Inaba shook his head as if to say, “Don’t worry about it” to Tio, then started caressing his stretched-out ears. In response to Shea’s question, he simply nodded into the distance, and Shea turned to see Shizuku and the others heading over on their Skyboards. They closed the distance pretty quickly, then alighted on the ground next to Shea and Tio.

“Are you two...? No, you don’t look very okay.”

“Looks like you had a pretty tough fight.”

“Ha ha... It felt like I was watching the battle of the ages. Thank god Shizuku and the others brought me back so I could see this.”

“I was worried when Inaba-san suddenly ran off, but...you guys can’t move, can you? Hang on a second; I’ll heal you up.”

Suzu cast healing magic on the two of them, while Shizuku pulled out some potions for them to drink. Shea rested on Shizuku’s lap, while Tio rested on Suzu’s. Meanwhile, Ryutarou and Kouki looked around at the crumbling islands in awe.

Smiling, Shea replied, “I’m glad you guys made it out okay. Seems like that idiot over there’s finally reflected on his actions too, huh? That’s great.”

“More or less,” Shizuku said with a somewhat bitter smile, prompting Kouki to avert his gaze awkwardly.

“But where is the other...? No, forget it. I’m sure you did your best,” Tio said, gently stroking Suzu’s cheek.

Regardless of how things had turned out, and regardless of whether or not Suzu herself had accepted the outcome, Tio knew for a fact that she must have done her absolute best. And because Tio knew that, she knew it wasn’t words of comfort that Suzu was looking for,

as that would only be insulting her resolve, hence why she chose to praise her instead.

Tears welled up in Suzu's eyes, but she quickly blinked them away and smiled wordlessly at Tio. It was a very mature, very stunning smile.

Shizuku smiled as she watched Tio and Suzu talk, then said, "But I have to say, that was quite a shock. After we jumped through the portal that led us here, we thought we'd accidentally warped into the end of the world."

"I couldn't believe my eyes. It was like we'd been sent straight to hell."

"That sleek black dragon was you, right, Tio-san?"

"It was. I had originally planned on unveiling that form after we'd reached Master to help him fight Ehit, but...I suppose it was worth using it here if it meant getting rid of the Sanctuary's entire supply of monsters."

It was at that point that Shizuku and the others realized the level of the battlefield they'd been fighting on was completely different from what Tio and Shea had been facing, and an awed look dawned on their faces.

"Anyway, I'm impressed you guys got here so fast. You didn't even have the compass to guide you," Shea said, sitting up now that she could move a little.

Most of the zones Shea and the others had passed through had been veritable mazes. While they had killed all of the obstacles that had inhabited those zones, it should have still taken Shizuku and the others longer to catch up.

Shea gave Shizuku a questioning look, then replied in a confused voice, saying, "There wasn't really much room to get lost. Since the

clock tower you guys went through got destroyed, we lost some time finding another ruin with a portal to pass through, but once we did, it took us straight here.”

“Hmm. Did you get lucky, or did the composition of dimensions change after we passed through them? Well, either way, this is good for us! If you hadn’t gotten here as fast as you did, we might have ended up splatting on the ground!”

“That’s really not the kind of thing you should be laughing about, Tio-san...” Suzu mumbled in an exasperated voice. Laughing, Tio got to her feet as well.

“Anyway...where’s Hajime?” Shizuku asked. It was clear that had been the foremost question on her mind since she’d arrived, but she’d held back because Tio and Shea had needed immediate attention.

Suzu and the others’ expressions stiffened. Seeing as Shea and Tio had survived, Shizuku doubted Hajime had been killed, but—

“Oh, whoops. We probably should have mentioned that first, huh?”

“Indeed. We’re sorry for worrying you.”

Shea and Tio gave a brief summary of what had happened before Shizuku and the others had arrived.

“I see... We should hurry and catch up to him, then,” Shizuku said determinedly, and the others nodded. But just then, there was a loud rumbling noise, and the entire dimension began to shake.

Shea and the others glanced around, instantly wary. They could see cracks forming in the sky, and it looked like the entire dimension was starting to fall apart. Furthermore, the islands that had been damaged in the fight were unable to withstand the dimensional earthquake and started crumbling.

Shea and the others hurriedly took out their Skyboards and rose into the air.

Looking down, Suzu exclaimed, “I-Is that...the ground?!”

The sea of clouds had finally parted, and as it dissipated, the area below it finally became visible. However, the sky below was distorted, as if everyone was looking at it through a fish-eye lens. And far below that distorted space was a familiar sight. Suzu and the others could see a fortress sitting in the middle of a flat plain...with thousands upon thousands of people fighting against an army of apostles. But then, the distortion suddenly vanished, and other distortions appeared elsewhere in the sky in multiple places. They showed the dimensions Shea and the others had passed through, as well as other areas they didn't recognize.

The ominous rumbling grew stronger, and the distortions that connected to other dimensions started appearing and disappearing more quickly and more frequently than ever.

“I bet this is Hajime-san’s doing. He must have started fighting Ehit!”

“Indeed. This Sanctuary is a creation of Ehit’s, so it stands to reason that he has the most influence over this space. If it has become this unstable, then it’s quite likely that Ehit is being driven into a corner.”

Of course, Tio had no proof to back up her conjecture. This dimension might have been simply dissolving because Ehit had begun enacting the final stage of his plan to destroy this world. However, no one thought that was the case for even a moment. Everyone smiled, certain that Shea and Tio were right.

“We better hurry, then, or we’ll miss the whole fight,” Shizuku replied.

“Yeah! Let’s get out of here and meet up with Nagumo-kun!” Suzu said with a nod, and everyone started heading toward the obelisk.

The island it had been on had crumbled away, so now it was simply a pure-white pillar floating in the air.

Shea was still a little woozy, so she needed to lean on Shizuku's shoulder and ride on her Skyboard, but she nevertheless reached out to touch the obelisk without hesitation.

"Hm?"

However, nothing happened when Shea touched the obelisk. When Hajime had last checked his compass, it had definitely been pointing to this obelisk, and the portals that Shea and the others had gone through on their way here hadn't required any special activation rules.

Puzzled, Shea touched the obelisk again. Shizuku, Suzu, Tio, Ryutarou, and Kouki all tried as well, but again nothing happened.

"Why?!" Shea shouted, slapping the obelisk over and over.

"It may have something to do with why this dimension has become so unstable. There are more obelisks on the other islands. Let us see if any of them still work," Tio said, though she had a bad feeling that they might be trapped here. Still, they all split up to try the other obelisks in the distance.

Unfortunately, none of them activated. And to make matters worse, the cracks in the sky were getting so big that they were breaking apart pieces of the sky...and there was nothing but darkness beyond those shattered segments. If you stared at them long enough, they looked like nothing more than black walls, but as a test, Shizuku tried throwing a pebble at one of them.

"Looks like anything that goes in disintegrates," Shizuku said. The stone had turned to dust and vanished as soon as it had hit the blackness.

"This doesn't look too good..."

“I doubt we’re somehow special and won’t get obliterated if we try to enter...”

“What about the obelisk we used to get in here?” Suzu suggested, and everyone hurriedly headed back there.

Right now, they were more worried about their immediate survival than catching up to Hajime. Even if backtracking lost them time, escaping this dimension was their top priority.

While they hurried back to their starting obelisk, the dimension’s destruction started accelerating. It was like a cage slowly constricting around them. Floating islands were swallowed up and destroyed one after the other. The group had to take several detours when the space right in front of them cracked and shattered, exposing only blackness, but eventually, they made it to the obelisk that led back to the abandoned ruins. But unfortunately, that one didn’t activate either.

“Oh no...we can’t even go back...” Kouki said in a voice tinged with despair. A distortion near the obelisk showed Shea and the others the abandoned ruins they’d come from. It seemed that dimension was also falling apart. It wasn’t just here, then. No, the entirety of the Sanctuary was crumbling.

“Is this...as far as we go?” Kouki asked, resigning himself to his grim fate. No one could bring themselves to contradict him.

There was no way out and nothing any of them could do. Shizuku, Suzu, and Ryutarou gritted their teeth in frustration.

“There’s still hope,” Shea said, and the four childhood friends suddenly looked up.

Shea was looking up at the crumbling sky, her gaze resolute.

“That there is. Master may end up defeating Ehit before this place collapses and come back with Yue to rescue us.”

Tio was also looking up at the sky, her faith in Hajime and Yue unwavering.

“Yep. Besides, it’s not like we’re totally out of options. If things get really bad, we can just dive into one of the distortions that are connected to Tortus.”

“Hah, now that’s a plan,” Ryutarou said. “If we’re gonna die anyway, might as well give it a shot.”

“Yes, but let’s make that our last resort. Also, I’m not sure if it’ll help, but I’ll try putting a barrier around us when we jump through.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. You’re right; we can’t just give up. I’ll help strengthen your barrier.”

No matter how hopeless the situation appeared, they would continue to struggle until the very end. That had always been Hajime’s way, and it was the most important lesson Shizuku and the others had learned since being summoned to Tortus.

The group was easily able to find a distortion that was connected to Tortus, and probably because of the accelerated collapse of the dimension, the distortion wasn’t disappearing, so they could just wait there.

Just as they prepared themselves to jump through, someone came to get them, though it wasn’t the person they’d expected.

“Hm? Is something flying this way?!”

Indeed, something seemed to be coming up to them from the ground. The moment Tio and the others realized that, there was a burst of light, prompting everyone to cover their eyes. As they grew more accustomed to the light, the group looked down to see a single arrow pushing its way through the distortion in space.

“W-Wait, isn’t that—?”

Shea recognized that arrow...and there was only one person who possessed the rest of those concept-magic-imbued arrows that were inferior copies of an artifact that had long been lost.

The arrow bored a hole in the distortion, and a tiny robe-clad golem with a smiley-face mask popped into the crumbling dimension Shea and the others were in. She put her right hand on her hip, lifted one foot into the air, made a peace sign with her left hand, and winked. Shea would have recognized that super annoying pose anywhere.

“Yahoo! How’re you guys doing? Everyone’s favorite beautiful genius mage, Miledi Reisen, is here!”

The last living Liberator, Miledi Reisen, had arrived.

Epilogue

A lone ray of platinum silver light shot through a dark empty place that was reminiscent of the bottom of the abyss. It seemed to come from nowhere and created a straight line toward the ground—which was a large white pillar. As it hit the top of the pillar, the light dispersed...and a kneeling figure appeared in the center of the pillar—Hajime.

Hajime drew Donner and Schlag, then looked around warily. Even without using his night vision skill, he could see surprisingly clearly.

There was a single white path that extended away from the pillar, which turned into a long staircase. Hajime couldn't sense anyone or anything nearby, nor did he detect any heat sources or mana signatures. As far as he could tell, there weren't any traps on the staircase or the path. And so, he slowly got to his feet and started walking forward.

The pure darkness all around him felt nostalgic. Hajime had first met Yue in the dark depths of the abyss, after all. When he'd opened the door to her seal, that single ray of light that had shone through had illuminated the golden vampire princess. The lone white path cutting through the surrounding darkness reminded Hajime of that meeting...and that reminder brought all the other memories flooding back.

Her crimson eyes, which had gazed unwaveringly at him. Her subdued voice, which at first sounded dispassionate, but Hajime quickly came to learn was full of emotion. Her seductive gaze and luscious lips, and the way that she blushed a little whenever he called her name. Her aloof facade, which quickly crumbled because of how much she liked teasing people. Her beautiful profile as she fought, wreathed in golden light. The way she puffed her chest out

proudly whenever she accomplished something. The affection she poured into her voice every single time she called his name.

Hajime's eyes glimmered with emotion as he warily made his way down the silent passage. He was at once filled with both a longing for his beloved and a burning desire to kill his foe in the most brutal way possible.

Before long, Hajime reached the stairs and started making the long climb upward. With each step he took, his two burning desires grew stronger and stronger.

The landing at the top of the stairs was wreathed in a faint light. Hajime stepped into that light without hesitation.

A blindingly white world filled his vision as he stepped into a new dimension. Everything around him, as far as he could see, was just pure white. It made gauging distance difficult, and though the floor underneath him was solid ground, it was hard to actually tell when he looked down because it looked no different from the rest of his surroundings. He couldn't shake the feeling that he would start falling endlessly at any second.

There was only a single speck of black in the entirety of this pure-white dimension.

"Welcome to the heart of my Sanctuary," a voice filled with equal parts joy and anger said. That voice belonged to the person Hajime had gone through so much to find. But at the same time, it sounded completely unlike her. It was as though unwanted noise had disrupted a perfect symphony.

There was a tiered altar a few dozen meters in front of him. Atop it was a throne, and the owner of that voice was sitting on the throne. She was smiling faintly, her chin resting in her hands as she had her legs crossed. There was something bewitching about that smile, but it wasn't bewitching in the same way that Hajime remembered.

"You did well to make it this far."

She was wearing a black dress that exposed her porcelain-white shoulders and had a very steep neckline that showcased a surprisingly large bosom. It was parted at the bottom to reveal her slender legs as well. And, while she was relatively slender, she still had curves in all the right places.

Hajime was staring at a grown-up version of Yue.

Extra Chapter: An Affectionate Challenge for the Vampire Princess

Hajime let out a sigh in the Hour Crystal workshop within Oscar's hidden house at the bottom of the Great Orcus Labyrinth.

"This isn't good enough..." he muttered, the crimson light of his mana fading away.

"I'm sorry, Hajime-kun," I said, feeling bad that I wasn't being of much use. He stared down at his workbench, which had a big hole in the middle. There had been a huge pile of raw ore where that hole was a second ago.

I was the one who'd destroyed that pile of ore and made the hole in his workbench.

"It's not your fault, Kaori. I knew from the start that disintegration magic would be hard to work with," Hajime replied, smiling wanly and patting my shoulder. He was trying to incorporate my disintegration magic into an artifact so he could neutralize the apostles' disintegration magic and nullify their biggest advantage.

I was doing my best to fire off as weak and slow shots as possible so Hajime could synthesize his ore with my magic, but none of the materials he tried so far were able to withstand disintegration magic.

Sealstone and divinity stone could survive for a little bit, but even if Hajime enchanted sealstone with disintegration magic, sealstone's own properties would make it impossible to use. On the other hand, divinity stone was too rare and valuable to be suitable for a mass-produced artifact.

"Also...there's a crap-ton of magical protections on disintegration magic that make it hard to copy."

"Is it really that hard to deal with?"

“Yeah. It’s like wrapping a treasure chest in so many chains you can’t even see the actual chest anymore, then slapping a dozen padlocks on the chains. The amount of copy protection on this magic is insane.”

“Wow.”

According to Hajime, whenever anyone tried to interact with or analyze disintegration magic, they were stopped by a series of complex magical links that were baked into the disintegration spells themselves. The only reason I could use it so easily was because I had the innate knowledge the original owner of this body had, but other people wouldn’t be able to replicate disintegration magic in the same way.

Hajime was a good enough synergist that he could bypass the protections with enough time, but...

“It’s almost like Ehit predicted that someone might try this...or maybe someone already succeeded in copying disintegration magic, which is why he went so ham on protecting it? But if that’s the case, does that mean contemporary disintegration magic is stronger than older disintegration magic?”

Hajime fell silent as he lapsed into thought. Then, after a few seconds, he looked up at the ceiling and muttered, “Did you try the same thing as me? You really made my life harder, you know that?” with a faint smile.

He seemed to have thought of something. It was really vexing not being able to follow Hajime’s thought processes at times like this.

“Hajime-kun, what are you thinking?”

“It’s too inefficient to try to make disintegration magic-enchanted artifacts. We’ve got other countermeasures, so let’s stop trying to get disintegration magic to work.”

He immediately abandoned his current strategy and started thinking up a new plan.

I love how decisive you always are! I also love that look on your face when you're grappling with a really hard problem!

I gazed raptly at him as he sat down and started drawing and redrawing new lines on his magic circle.

“Kaori? What’s wrong? Are you getting tired?”

“Huh?! Oh, sorry, I wasn’t paying attention. What did you say?”

Shoot, I was so captivated by Hajime-kun that I almost hugged him.

If Yue saw me, she’d have teased me so much...though she wasn’t exactly around at the moment. But if she was, I just know she’d say something like, “You’re like a moth drawn to a flame,” or something. She’d never miss an opportunity to tease me.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Oh yeah, I’m totally fine! Anyway, what were you saying?”

Hajime’s face was inches from mine, so I blushed furiously as I backed away.

“I was saying that if you can draw on the experiences of the apostle that used to be in this body, maybe you can access her memories too, but...maybe we should rest a bit before trying that.”

Hajime gave me a slightly worried look, and I smiled reassuringly at him and replied, “I’m fine, really.”

“Well, if you say so. In that case, think you can try accessing the apostle’s memories?”

“Let’s see...”

Hajime’s plan made sense. There were tons of apostles, and they all had a shared memory bank, meaning their memories were a huge

repository of historical knowledge. Thus, if we sifted through their memories, we'd surely be able to find some countermeasures against them.

Unfortunately, there was a problem. Apostles' memories weren't stored in their brains like they were with regular people. At the very least, I'd never once been able to access any of this apostle's memories. I'd actually tried to look at the apostle's memories before out of curiosity, but I hadn't been able to find anything.

This body remembered how to use dual claymores, disintegration magic, and how to fly, so I'd just had to get used to that before I could fight like an apostle, but knowing what they knew had proven harder to do. It was kind of like how people with amnesia still knew how to eat and put on clothes and other common things but couldn't remember their past. Honestly, even these apostles' bodies were like dolls, built to be incredibly sturdy, but also completely generic and uniform.

That aside, it was worth giving the memory accessing plan another shot. We had access to a lot more ancient magic now, after all. In order to concentrate, I sat down on an aged leather sofa in the corner of the room. Hajime came over as well and knelt down in front of me.

Wait, he's kneeling? Oh my god, and now he's taking my hand! He even pulled out a ring?! H-Hang on, is he about to propose to me?! You can't do that, Hajime-kun! You can't cheat on Yue while she's gone! Besides, I can't have my first time on a sofa! That's just too lewd! Most importantly, though, we can't do this until we get Yue back and I officially become a part of—

"I don't really know what the apostles' memryscape is like. I may get hit by some kind of counter when I try to access it, so I'm sorry, but I'm gonna need to do this just in case."

As he said that, Hajime deployed a barrier at my feet.

Oh god, I was just about to say something horrible.

“Don’t worry, Kaori; I already knew you were a huge pervert. You don’t have to feel bad about it.”

“Did you just read my mind?!”

“Come on, we both need to use evolution magic together here to try to analyze as much information as we can. That ring should help you with casting, since I know your base affinity for it isn’t high,” Hajime said as he stuck the ring he’d brought out on my pinky finger.

I wish you’d put it on my ring finger instead...but maybe I can still show this off to Yue when she gets back. Oh no, I’m doing it again. Maybe I really am getting a little tired. Not physically, but emotionally.

Because time in the Hour Crystal workshop was stretched out so much, I’d lost all sense of time. According to Myu-chan, it had only been a few minutes outside, but it felt like hours had passed in here. It felt like we were being completely left behind by the rest of the world, which just made me dwell on our one party member that wasn’t here. I’d been focusing for so long that I was starting to let slip every now and then, and, of course, every time my mind would wander to thoughts of Yue.

Still, I knew Hajime had it way harder than I did. After all, he’d been spending every waking—and sleeping—moment in this workshop. He’d spent the most time away from Yue out of all of us, in terms of his sensation of the passage of time, so I didn’t have any right to complain.

I slapped my cheeks to bring my attention back to the task at hand. Just then, the door to the workshop burst open. Shea, who’d gone out collecting materials and completing miscellaneous tasks for Hajime in my place, had just returned.

“I brought the stuff you asked— Wait, are you proposing?! How can you do that when Yue-san’s not even here?! Don’t tell me you’re planning on having your first time here and now on the so—!”

“Get over here, you lewd bunny.”

“Who are you calling a lewd bunny?! Wait, isn’t that even more of an insult than ‘worthless bunny’?!”

Oh god, I’m so embarrassed. I was thinking the same thing as Shea, the girl who wears those revealing clothes 24/7!

“You’re thinking something really rude about my clothes right now, aren’t you?” Shea said, glaring at me.

“Is it really that easy to read my expressions?! How much of what I’m thinking leaks through?!”

“All of it,” Shea and Hajime replied at the exact same time.

Why couldn’t I have learned how to look expressionless like the apostles when I was able to copy all of their other abilities...?

While I hung my head in disappointment, Hajime explained his plan to Shea. Apparently, he wanted Shea to help restrain me on the off chance that accessing the apostles’ memories caused me to go berserk and revert to being an apostle. He also wanted to see if there were any other glaring weaknesses this body had, since I’d been so easily stopped by Ehit back at the Demon Lord’s castle. That was why he was using evolution magic’s information analysis spells.

It was my job to stay back and protect everyone on Tortus, so if anything happened to me, Hajime wouldn’t be around to help. Thus, he wanted to do everything he could ahead of time so I’d be fine no matter what happened during the battle on the ground.

Hajime really was good at preparing for every single eventuality. More than anything, though, I could tell how much he cared about me by how thorough he was.

“Aye, aye! All right, Kaori-san, stop drooling over Hajime-san and start accessing those memories!”

“I... I wasn’t drooling over him!”

Unfortunately, when I put my hands to my cheeks, I realized I had been grinning like an idiot and probably drooling a little too. I once again brought my focus back on what I needed to do and activated the information analyzing spell, then dived into this body’s depths. I tried honing in on the sensation I felt when trying to draw on the experiences of this body’s memories of moving and fighting.

Hopefully, that would get us some new information. Because I needed to stay back, I wouldn’t be able to directly rescue Yue, which was precisely why I wanted to help Hajime and the others as much as I could by doing things like this.

“What is this? It feels like I’m getting scattered fragments...like trying to watch TV through a bunch of static noise.”

I could just barely make out images flitting behind my closed eyelids. Or rather, they were coming up from somewhere deep in my brain.

“Does it look like they’re protected in the same way as disintegration magic?” Hajime asked.

“No, it’s more like there’s just bits and pieces left of a shattered whole.”

“I guess most of them were deleted when the apostle herself died.”

“The ability to use disintegration magic and my fighting skills were baked into the body rather than the mind, so maybe some fragments of memories are left within the body as well.”

“Those might be the moments that left the biggest impressions on the apostle. What kind of stuff are you getting, Kaori?”

I wasn’t able to give Hajime a reply immediately. It was like going through a slideshow of tattered pictures. Most of what I got were

horribly tragic scenes of tons of people dying in terrible ways. They were similar to the scenes we'd seen in the Sunken Ruins of Melusine. People fighting for peace, people fighting for their loved ones, suddenly went crazy or were killed by others who'd gone crazy. Meanwhile, the apostle that caused all this insanity just watched impassively from her perch in the skies.

I covered my mouth with my hands as a sudden urge to vomit came over me. But Hajime and Shea gently rubbed my back and offered me words of encouragement. The nausea slowly went away. I could do this, as long as I had them supporting me.

Hajime took my hand in his and squeezed it tightly.

"You don't have to force yourself," he said gently, and I nodded.

Reinvigorated, I once again dived into the sea of scattered memories. As I sifted through them, I began to realize why it was these memories specifically that had survived the death of the apostle.

Some of them were scenes of dragonmen fighting valiantly despite being betrayed by all the other mortal races and losing their homeland. Others were of vampires struggling against Ehit solely to protect their loved ones. And yet others were of knights of the church joining forces with their hated enemies, demons, to protect a group of heretics. Then, I saw an unfamiliar race fight to the last to protect the beastmen under their care. And finally, I saw a scene of a weak rabbitman girl standing defiantly against an apostle.

"A bunny girl...the future? Inevitability?"

"Kaori-san?"

"I saw a bunny girl the same age as you fighting alone against an apostle, Shea."

"Ah—!"

She'd chosen to fight to the death to protect her family and her comrades. Despite being on the verge of death, the words the girl said with a defiant smile were so powerful that even I was overwhelmed despite knowing it was just a memory and only being able to see fragments of it.

Shea looked pensive for a few seconds, then grinned and replied, "He he he... Looks like there was a heroic bunny girl in the distant past too! Well, no one's stronger than us rabbits, after all!"

Her ears flopped excitedly back and forth, as did her tail.

Of course, this was precisely why those memories had been burned so vividly into this apostle's body. Every person in them had fought on proudly, resolutely, for the sake of what they believed in, even knowing they would die. They'd struggled to the last, never once losing the will to fight. Despite the overwhelming despair of their situation and the harsh cruelty of reality, they'd burned brightly until their flames were extinguished. That was why the apostle had never been able to forget those moments.

Everyone said the apostles were emotionless, but I was starting to doubt that. At the very least, they'd clearly felt *something* when they'd encountered these people.

"Miledi Reisen-san...was probably the first person in Tortus to ever beat an apostle."

She had created the Reisen Gorge and had been the leader of the Liberators. Moreover, she'd fought the apostles head-on and thoroughly trashed them. That had likely been the greatest shock they had ever received.

"How did she do it?"

"W-Well, I'm having a hard time getting the details. There's too much static. Plus, from the apostle's perspective, Miledi held her

hand out to her, and then she was suddenly swallowed up by a dark energy.”

“So she overwhelmed them with gravity magic? Tch, that’s not gonna help us.”

“I mean, even now, she’s strong enough to beat the shit out of apostles. Who knows how strong she was in her prime?” Shea said.

It was reassuring to know someone that strong would be on our side during the decisive battle. I’d heard that she’d transferred her soul into a golem to keep on living past her natural lifespan.

“Oh yes, apparently, when she was still human, Miledi was super cute and—”

“She definitely wasn’t,” Hajime and Shea said at the same time, cutting me off.

“What?!”

Why are they so adamant about that?

“Listen up, Kaori-san. It’s true that she’s really strong, but her personality is the absolute worst. Like, unbelievably bad,” Shea explained.

“Hence why there’s no way she could have been cute. QED,” Hajime added.

“But I’m telling you the truth! When she killed one of the apostles, she looked really cool and her hair was—”

“Noooooo, I don’t wanna hear it! There’s no way that Miledi was cool or cute!”

“Miledi’s nothing more than an annoying pain in the ass with a smiley-face mask! Stop trying to convince us otherwise!”

“Is she really that bad?!”

What in the world happened to them in the Reisen Gorge? I was kind of looking forward to meeting Miledi, but now I'm getting scared...

"Anyway, did you see anything else?" Hajime asked, clearly trying to change the subject.

"I'll try searching a bit deeper."

I dived in deeper. Most of the details on the fights the apostles had had in the past had been deleted, but just like that small fragment with Miledi, it was possible I'd catch a glimpse of some other useful information. I put even more power into my information analysis spell and tried searching specifically for any wounds this body had received in the past. And as I did so, my senses dulled and the warmth of Hajime's and Shea's hands started to grow distant, as did their reassuring voices. It felt like I was diving into the TV static I was watching, and while it was a little scary, I didn't falter.

Slowly but surely, I started seeing new scenes. Mostly scenes of past battles. Throughout the apostles' long history, only a small fraction of people had managed to even scratch them. I couldn't tell exactly who'd given the apostles these injuries, but I did learn a lot about the wounds themselves. Whether they'd been burned, crushed, sliced, shattered, diced, or flattened. I also learned about the dozens of...me's(?) that had been sucked into a swirling vortex of gravity and obliterated.

Oh no. I can't get out. I can't destroy it either. This black whirlpool is going to consign me to oblivion. I—

"Kaori."

I heard a gentle whisper...and suddenly my vision shifted.

Crap, I nearly synced fully with the memories of the apostles. I nearly accepted their wounds as my own!

Cold sweat...didn't pour down my back, and my breath...wasn't coming in short gasps! But I also couldn't move an inch.

"Yue, what're you doing out here at this time of night?"

My mouth was moving on its own too! I had no idea what was going on. The panic only lasted for a few seconds, however. The moment I saw that flowing blonde hair, I calmed down immediately. And once I calmed down, I realized what was happening.

I could hear the sound of waves in the distance, and there was a starry sky above me that stretched all the way out to the horizon. A familiar girl's blonde hair gleamed like golden threads in the starlight.

This... This is one of my own memories.

After we cleared the Sunken Ruins of Melusine, Yue had gone out late one night after everyone had gone to sleep, and I'd chased after her. I'd found her sitting on the pier, so I'd called out to her.

I must have delved too deep into the apostle's memories and instinctively fled back to one of my own before I got swallowed up. But why this memory? It was also a rather disconcerting feeling to have slipped into a past version of myself. However, I had no idea how I could make it back to reality, nor did I particularly feel like returning at the moment. I wanted to experience this memory for a little bit longer, to relive it as vividly as possible.

"Mmm? I came here because it looked like you wanted to talk to me, Kaori," Yue replied, turning back to me with a playful smile. That smile was so bewitching that my heart skipped a beat.

It was actually true I'd been looking for a chance to talk to Yue alone, but I couldn't believe she'd just gone and surreptitiously left without saying anything to make that opportunity for me. It was times like this that reminded me she was so much older than me, despite looking younger. I felt a mix of admiration and frustration as I sat

down next to her. Of course, I'd never tell her I admired her, no matter what!

"I just...wanted to know a bit more about you, Yue."

Seeing my past self blush as she said that made me blush too.

God, why did I say that like I was about to confess to her?!

"Hmmm? You want to know about me, not Hajime?"

"I already know everything there is to know about Hajime-kun!"

"You really are cocky..." Yue said with a small smile, then patted the ground next to her.

"Mmm..." I said, sounding just like Yue, then sat down by her side. I remembered how embarrassed I'd been about acting like a shy child around her. However, Yue hadn't been bothered at all. In fact, she'd found it kind of cute and laughed.

Seeing this memory again now, I could tell that Yue had probably seen right through me from the start...including the fact that I'd developed an inferiority complex after seeing how much stronger she was than me.

Still, it was precisely because I'd been able to get over that inferiority complex that Yue had finally accepted me as her rival in love. It was when I'd worked up the courage to face her properly and ask her about herself that Yue had first taken me seriously.

After that, Yue told me tons of stories. Both from her time as a former queen, and from when she'd traveled with Hajime in the abyss. She told me about how she'd felt when Hajime had first opened the door to her seal, and when he'd given her a new name. She'd opened up completely to me. And in return, Yue had asked me about myself. She'd listened intently to all of my stories, never once making fun of my feelings or what I'd thought about any particular event.

I think that was the moment I'd felt a kinship with Yue. It was extremely fun swapping stories about Hajime, like we were showing off our treasures to one another. We talked for so long we didn't even notice the sky gradually getting lighter. But when dawn finally broke, it was so dazzling we both fell silent and admired it for a few moments. It was at that point we decided we should probably go back, and I got to my feet. At that point in time, I was feeling surprisingly refreshed despite all that had happened.

"You know, I'm sure you and Hajime-kun are soulmates, Yue."

"Soul...mate?"

"Yeah. It's like when branches of two different trees entwine around each other and it looks like they've become one. It means you two can't ever be separated."

Yue looked silently up at me for a few seconds.

"Does that mean you're giving up on him?" she asked finally.

With my back to the rising sun, I said in a cheerful voice, "Nope! It just means I'm gonna work harder than ever to stick close to Hajime-kun! One way or another, I'm gonna worm my way into his heart! There's no way I'm letting you have him all to yourself!"

Yue narrowed her eyes, looking almost impressed. At the time, I thought she'd just been squinting because of the sun, but now I could identify Yue's expression for what it really was.

The light of the rising sun blotted out my vision, and before I knew it, I was in a different place. It was night once again, but the moon and the stars were much closer. For this memory, I was looking down at myself from above. I was lying down with my eyes closed, and Yue was gently brushing my hair. Noint's body was next to mine.

This is...the Divine Cathedral.

This was a memory from when I'd decided to transfer my soul to the apostle's body.

"You're such an idiot, Kaori. A stupid, dumb idiot."

Oh yeah, this was when she kept insulting me a bunch.

Yue and Tio were taking turns casting spirit magic on me so I wouldn't die, and right now, Tio was the one resting. Hajime and Shea had transferred all their mana to Yue and Tio, so they were resting as well. And it was because the two of them were together that Yue was in such a bad mood.

"Oh, give it a rest already!"

"You're so noisy... Even though you died so easily, idiot Kaori."

I'd been legitimately annoyed back then, but as I looked back on it now, I felt rather embarrassed.

"I tried my best, you know?! I kept healing everyone even after getting stabbed through the heart! I didn't give up until—!"

"You got lucky!"

This was the first time Yue had legitimately gotten mad at me. That outburst had been super surprising at the time. Until then, I hadn't even been able to imagine Yue raising her voice, let alone yelling. Even though I was just a spirit floating in the air, I stiffened up as I heard it.

"Had the conditions for beating the labyrinth in the Divine Mountain been even slightly different, had it taken any longer for me to beat it, had literally anything just been a little different, you would have died for good!"

"B-But..."

"Why weren't you more careful?! Why didn't you protect yourself better?! Why did you prioritize healing other people over yourself?! If Tio hadn't cleared the labyrinth...you'd be gone forever..."

Those last few words echoed ominously through the mountains. I was at a loss for words. Not because I was scared or confused, but because I could tell just how much Yue cared about me.

While Tio had been keeping me alive with spirit magic, Yue and Shea had both challenged the labyrinth normally, and Yue had cleared it in record time. I'd asked Shea about it later, and apparently, Yue had fought so desperately that she'd outpaced even Shea's monstrous strength. Yue had tanked her way through all attacks and relied on her regenerative powers to push through. While that had been Yue's fighting style from the start, she hadn't needed to take as many injuries as she had. As a result, though, she'd blitzed through the labyrinth in just one hour.

Hajime had told me afterward that she'd been panting and barely able to stand when she'd returned to the summit.

At the time, I hadn't known any of that and had just been excited that I'd be able to get a new, stronger body. Thinking back on it, I really had been an idiot. I wished I could tell my old self that.

For a while, the two of us said nothing. My sense of time had been pretty messed up when I was just a soul, but I could tell now that quite a bit of time passed. Eventually, though, the weight of Yue's words sank in.

"Yeah, you're right... I'm sorry."

Looking back on it now, I couldn't believe how pathetic I'd been. A crappy apology was all I'd been able to give her. And yet, Yue shook her head and apologized in return.

“Don’t apologize, idiot Kaori. I was just venting. If anything, I’m the one who should apologize. I let my emotions get the better of me and left you to fight alone. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. You thought I’d be fine because I had Lily and my classmates with me, right? Besides, taking down the enemy commander was the right tactical move. Though, I guess you had a personal grudge against him too...but that’s fine. If I’d had more strength, I would have done the same thing.”

“Mmm...”

An awkward silence formed between the two of us as we struggled to express ourselves.

Eventually, I floated down to Yue, who refused to meet my gaze, and stared at the side of her face. I wanted to talk to her, but I didn’t know about what. In the end, I blurted out, “Umm, oh yeah, tell me about the labyrinth in the Divine Mountain. I want to try clearing it too.”

Oh my god, Kaori, you could have at least thanked her for saving your life first!

Of course, the me from that time had been grateful, but she hadn’t been able to say thanks. Probably because I’d known that wasn’t what Yue wanted to hear at the moment. We’d become proper comrades, so Yue didn’t want me to think I owed her or anything. Though obviously, that might have been arrogant of me, but thinking back on it now, I was probably right.

“If you end up being able to use the apostle’s powers, you can probably do it easily.”

“Really?”

“Mmm... Even if you can’t, we’ll help you. It’ll be a good way of warming up and seeing how well your soul’s settled in the new body, and if it’s causing any problems in combat.”

“That makes sense. I hope I can use the apostle’s powers. Plus, if I manage to clear the labyrinth, I’ll be able to revive myself, and you won’t have to worry as much!”

“You make it sound like you’re bound to die again! Also, I wasn’t worried about you!”

“I won’t lose to you when we fight anymore either!”

“Do you ever listen...?”

Later on, I did manage to clear the labyrinth, and in only three hours too. Unlike most other labyrinths, this one hadn’t been a maze. Instead, you went down a series of floors and had to fight the revived spirits of ancient Templar Knights on each one. They’d been way stronger than any of the knights I knew from the present. Not only did they all have their own special magic, but they were armed with replica Holy Swords and Sacred Armors. It had been pretty eye-opening seeing just how strong the church had been in the past.

The hardest part hadn’t been fighting them though; it had been fending off the constant brainwashing. Throughout the labyrinth, I’d constantly been assaulted by mental attacks trying to make me a believer in Ehit. Anyone with even an ounce of faith would have probably been unable to make it through. Fortunately, we didn’t worship Ehit at all. In fact, we knew he was our enemy, so I’d been able to push away the brainwashing through force of will.

From what I could tell, the main conceit of that labyrinth had been to test your resolve. It was meant to be a labyrinth of the mind, rather than a physical one. Anyone from Tortus would probably have been lost in that maze for a while, wavering between their faith and the true nature of the world.

Anyway, I should probably stop distracting myself by reminiscing about the labyrinth and pay attention to this memory again.

Past me was currently engrossed in Yue's story, and she totally didn't notice what I did.

Hajime-kun, Shea, and Tio were all peeking out from behind the ruins of the cathedral and watching us. Honestly, that made sense, considering Yue had shouted so loudly. There was no way they wouldn't have woken up. Still, they didn't have to be grinning like that while they watched us!

I can't believe I never even realized they'd been watching us!

We'd just been having a normal conversation, but I was still extremely embarrassed. I didn't have much time to dwell on my embarrassment though, as the sun rose and my vision shifted again.

At this point, I'd figured out that I was reliving all of my most memorable moments with Yue. The ones that had left the deepest impressions on me. I'd gotten completely sidetracked from my original goal of searching for the apostles' weakness, but one last memory wouldn't hurt. I wanted to see one more in this strange mindscape that showed things more vividly than when I normally recalled these moments.

It seemed my wish was heard, and as my vision settled I saw a verdant, moonlit forest. This was the night after we'd conquered Haltina's labyrinth. I was sitting on a small stump in one of Verbergen's plazas, looking up at the moon, when Yue walked over to me.

"Why are you trying so hard to look pensive?" Yue asked.

"Can't you read the mood?!"

"I can, but who cares about the mood you're trying to make? Anyway, let's talk about that face Hajime made."

“Seriously?! You’re just gonna force a new topic?”

“You say that, but I know you want to talk about it too...”

“Mrrrgh... Well...yes, fine, you’re right.”

Grinning, Yue sat down on the stump next to me. I knew exactly what Yue meant by “that face Hajime made.” After we’d conquered Haltina’s labyrinth and learned about concept magic, learned of a way home, Hajime had made an expression I hadn’t seen in a long time. It was the same gentle expression he used to make back in Japan. However, that smile had an iron core behind it, consisting of the strength he’d gained since coming here. It was definitely something I’d wanted to discuss with Yue.

The two of us had a fun time talking, arguing, and then talking again. Afterward, Yue showed me the real reason she’d come to meet me. She got up, walked over to me, and patted me on the head. As I looked at her, confused, she asked, “Do you want to reminisce about your home alone?”

Indeed, I had gotten quite homesick that night. After discovering there really was a way back, and seeing Hajime’s old self for a few seconds, I’d gotten quite nostalgic. And at the same time, I’d started missing my mom and dad dearly.

“You noticed?”

Yue shrugged her shoulders as if to say “of course,” but she didn’t tease me about it.

“None of your other friends from Earth, including Hajime, were the right person to talk to about your homesickness, which is why you’re brooding over it alone. But you didn’t actually want to be alone, did you?”

Yue was right on the mark. I would have actually been fine talking to Hajime about it, but I’d wanted to let Shea have him for the night.

Plus, I didn't think I would have been able to have a proper conversation with Shizuku-chan or the others. Suzu-chan still hadn't gotten over Eri-chan, and Shizuku-chan got all restless whenever the topic of Hajime came up. And, of course, there was no way I was going to talk to Kouki-kun or Ryutarou-kun alone! I didn't want weird rumors to spread, after all, so instead, I'd been thinking about my family alone, but that had definitely made me feel lonely.

As always, it had been Yue who'd picked up on all of that.

"What are your parents like?"

"Hmm...well, dad's super overprotective, while mom's a cooking teacher at—"

Yue patted my head again, then sat down on the stump next to me and motioned for me to continue. I knew I was letting her spoil me, but at the time, that was exactly what I needed.

I told Yue all about my hometown and my family. She didn't say much and mostly listened. Normally, she would have teased me at every turn, but for some reason, she knew how to be quiet at times like this. I could see why Hajime had fallen for Yue's kindness.

Moreover, she was the first—and probably only—person I'd ever get into a slapping fight with. My one and only rival in love. It wasn't fair how amazing she was. And yet, she was no longer here because Ehit had—

"Ka...ri... Ri!"

The fact that she was gone hit me all over again, and I could feel my chest tightening up. I fully believed that we'd be able to bring her back, but that didn't stop me from feeling worried every time I relaxed my focus for even a second.



“Kao-san! Wake up!”

The knowledge that the smiling Yue in front of me would disappear the moment the sun rose made me terribly afraid.

Please, let me just stay in this world of memories for a little long—

“Kaori! Open your eyes!”

“Kaori-san!”

There was a sharp pain on my cheek, which forced my eyes open with a jolt. Hajime and Shea were looking worriedly down at me. The moonlit forest and Yue were nowhere to be found.

“I... I’m sorry...I got lost in my own memories.”

As I apologized, my vision grew blurry. I could feel something streaming down my cheeks...and when I touched them, my fingers came away wet.

“It’s not fair... You’re the one who said I should have been more careful...but then you went and got kidnapped... I want to yell at you, but you’re not even here!”

My thoughts were coming out in a jumbled mess. Unfortunately, now that the dam had burst, I couldn’t hold my feelings back, so I continued my incoherent rambling.

Suddenly, my vision went dark and I felt a warm sensation all around me. Hajime and Shea had both hugged me.

“I’m sorry. Because I went berserk back then, you never even got a chance to vent your feelings, Kaori,” Hajime said.

“You must have felt so alone... I do too.”

Hajime gently patted my head the way Yue used to, while Shea brushed her ears against my cheek.

“We’re gonna bring her back, no matter what. Then, you can fight with her again all you want.”

“Yue-san’s really obsessed with you, you know that? I’m honestly a little jealous.”

The two of them smiled at me, prompting fresh tears to spill from my eyes.

“Yeah...yeah.”

All I could do was nod. But while I couldn’t find the words to express myself, I put all my feelings into my smile. The pain that had been leaking through my cracked heart started to fade, and I could feel my burning resolve return.

Yue...

She was the person who annoyed me most in the world, but she was also the only person I could share everything with. She was my one and only rival in love.

Please come back soon. I can’t wait to talk with you and fight with you again. But first things first, the moment you get back, I’m gonna beat you to a pulp for making me worry so much!

Afterword

Hey, everyone. It's your favorite chuuni author, Ryo Shirakome here!

Thank you so much for picking up volume 12 of *Arifureta*.

I know I made you guys wait a long time for this volume, but I hope you liked it. Normally, when writing the novel version, I try to put in all the stuff I couldn't fit into the web version, but I was actually able to write more or less everything I wanted about the final battle in the web version, so there weren't too many additions this time around.

At first, I thought of including detailed descriptions of the dimensions Hajime and the others went through before reaching the Leviathan, or dedicating a chapter or so to Freid and Uranos's backstory, but as I started writing all that, I realized how redundant it would all be, so I used some spatial magic to chop all the extraneous bits out and speed the pacing up a bit. (Though, if you're interested, Freid's backstory is included in one of the short stories that come bundled with the store versions of the books. If you're curious, please do check it out. Though honestly, I probably shouldn't be using the afterword to talk about it.)

Anyway, the war back on Tortus will be in the next volume. In the end, all I really ended up doing in this volume was cleaning up the first half of the final volume of the webnovel, but hopefully, you guys still enjoyed it. At the very least, I hope you were able to kill some time with it.

By the way, I know fans of the webnovel said my original name for the Hundred Onyx Blades was lame, so I spent a whole two days trying to think of something cooler. I hope the new name is a lot cooler and way more chuuni. It is, right? Man, I really wish I was like those other authors who come up with amazing names for special moves one after another. Please share your right brains with me, guys! You know, like how Anpanman does.

By the way, I'd like to talk about Miledi-chan for a bit. With *Arifureta Zero* volume 6, the *Arifureta Zero* series will finally come to an end. It's a spin-off series with a totally different protagonist, but I'd like it if everyone checked it out before reading the final volume of the main series. I think it's important to know Miledi's story for the finale.

On another note, season two of the anime should be airing around the time this book finally hits the shelves in Japan. Parts of the extra chapter I wrote about Kaori and Yue would have happened right around what the anime will be covering, chronologically speaking. Hopefully, you'll see Kaori and Yue's interactions in a new light after learning about the kinds of conversations they had off-screen. Though either way, I hope you check out both *Arifureta Zero* and the anime.

Now then, last, but certainly not least, it's time for the acknowledgments.

I'd like to thank Takayaki-sensei, my amazing editor, proofreader, and everyone else who helped publish this book. Without you, I wouldn't be here. I'm also extremely grateful to all of the manga artists who are working on the various manga spin-offs.

And, of course, I owe a big thank-you to all of my readers.

The next volume will be the last of *Arifureta*'s main story. I hope you stick with me until the very end!

Ryo Shirakome

Bonus Short Stories

The Rabbit Who Heralds the End of a Journey

“Heeeeeey! Milediiiiiiii! Get the hell out heeeeeere!” Shea’s voice echoed through the Reisen Gorge, followed by a thunderous crash as her right hook smashed through the revolving door that served as the entrance to the labyrinth.

“Hell yeah!” she said as the door shattered.

“Don’t you ‘hell yeah’ meeeeeee!”

Those words floated up on the epitaph at the entrance of the labyrinth, but of course, Shea didn’t care. She was just happy she’d finally gotten her revenge on the revolving door that had once made her wet herself.

“Long time no see, Milefuck Reisen.”

“Don’t just waltz in here like you own the place! And who are you calling Milefuck?!”

“Come on, what’s the big deal? Anyway, let me enter your room. I’ve got something important to discuss.”

“What’s the big deal?! You looked a whole lot cuter the last time you came here, you know?! Now you’re as insolent as that guy!”

“Wait, so you’re saying Hajime-san’s rubbed off on me? Aww, it’s kinda embarrassing when you point it out like that.”

“First you break down my front gate and now you’re bragging about how much you love your boyfriend? Get outta here! I hate normies like you!”

Shea was certain Miledi was fuming behind her smiley face mask right now. However, she’d come here on much more important

business than teasing Miledi, so she put on her serious face and said, "We're going to beat the shit out of Ehit! Come help us!"

Miledi would have gasped...if she had a mouth capable of doing so. She could feel her pulse rising, even though she hadn't had a real heart in millennia. An enormous wave of emotion washed over her.

Manipulating her labyrinth, she opened the door on Shea's side. That door led into the moving chamber Miledi had used to send Hajime and the others back to the start of the labyrinth when they'd first conquered it. Not seeing any other reply from Miledi, Shea cautiously stepped into the room. This time it didn't spin around wildly, and instead smoothly took Shea to her destination.

The door opened, revealing the giant room where Shea and the others had fought the giant golem, the final trial of the labyrinth. One of the floating blocks moved over to her, so she jumped onto it...and as it ferried her across the room, Shea's eyes widened in surprise.

"Wait...is that an apostle?"

There was a human-sized corpse at the feet of the giant golem. It had been pummeled so thoroughly it was barely recognizable, but the bits of claymore and ripped wings made it clear that it had once been an apostle. Looking around, Shea spotted a few more of them. However, the giant golem and the trial room were completely unharmed. Shea gulped, realizing that the trial really had just been a trial and that when Miledi Reisen the Liberator got serious, she was a whole lot more terrifying.

The block continued ferrying Shea without pause until it stopped before the door leading to Miledi's room. The same smiley-face golem was waiting for her inside, but there was no mirth behind that mask this time. Miledi was deadly serious, and the sheer pressure coming from that tiny body was enough to give Shea pause.

“Those apostles came to eliminate me, so I figured you guys might return soon. Or rather, I was hoping you would.”

“Miledi...”

“Ahhh...to think the time has finally come... Damn, I spent so long waiting for this moment, but now that it’s here, I don’t have anything clever to say.”

Miledi looked up at the ceiling, lost in thought. Shea watched her quietly, waiting for her to break the silence. It was a little touching knowing that her actions had brought about the moment Miledi had waited so long for.

After a long time, Miledi finally looked back down at Shea and asked in a solemn, almost divine voice, “Would you mind telling me what happened? And what exactly you wish of me?”

Despite feeling a little overwhelmed, Shea told Miledi the whole story. She told her about how they had managed to acquire all seven ancient magics, and about how Ehit had possessed Yue and declared that he would end the world in three days. Miledi listened quietly, sitting perfectly still and not making any comments or asking any questions.

Finally, after Shea finished telling the whole story, Miledi simply replied, “I see.”

It was just a filler statement that people said all the time, but for some reason this “I see” caused Shea to shiver. She would have never imagined that anyone could pack so much emotion into just those two words. They expressed so much more than any lengthy speech could have.

“So yeah, Miledi-san, I came here to—“

Shea had, of course, come to ask Miledi for help. Even if the current Miledi was a little intimidating, she wouldn't give up on her request easily.

"It's all good. There's no need to spell it out for me!" But to Shea's surprise, Miledi's intimidating aura vanished in an instant. In fact, Miledi's voice had regained the same annoying, cheery tone it usually had. "You need the help of this genius mage, don't you? Man, you guys can't do anything without me. Well, I guess if you say you *looove* me, I might be willing to lend you a hand!"

She poked Shea in the chest and grinning smugly (though her mask made it look like she was always smiling). In the end, Miledi was still Miledi. So naturally, Shea responded with a full-power axe kick to Miledi's head.

"Gaaah!" Miledi screamed, writhing around the ground in pain.

After that, she handed over the artifacts she'd saved for precisely this moment, all while being so annoying that Shea beat her up a few more times. She also promised to provide assistance during the final battle, but of course, she was so annoying as she did so that Shea destroyed the room with the gravity-magic-granting magic circle in a fit of rage.

Eventually, as Shea turned to leave, she said in an exasperated voice, "Anyway, I'm going back. Look after all the people on Tortus for me while we're fighting Ehit, okay?"

"You can count on me! You be careful too, Shea-chan. Don't underestimate how cruel Ehit can be."

"Hmph! No matter what he tries, we'll just crush him head-on!"

"Y-You're just gonna beat him with brute force? Well, I guess you'll be fine, since you're a bunny girl."

Shea cocked her head in confusion. Rabbitmen were universally considered the weakest race. Shea just happened to be an exception among exceptions. She would have understood if Miledi had said, ‘You’ll be fine, since you’re Shea,’ but she couldn’t get why Miledi had alluded to her race instead. It almost seemed as if Miledi considered rabbitmen a strong race.

Noticing her confusion, Miledi gave Shea a nostalgic look and said, “Rabbitmen are strong.”

“Huh?”

“That was something the beastmen’s strongest general said once long ago, back when the forest was ruled by a republic.”

“Was that general a...?” Shea trailed off and Miledi nodded.

In a gentle voice, she added, “Rabbitmen are by no means weak. The reason they’re cowards is because they have more empathy than any other race, and the reason they’re so good at running and hiding is because they’re kinder than anyone else. But if you get that gentle race riled up for real, then you’re in for a world of hurt. When they make up their minds, no one can stop them.”

Miledi had lived for an incredibly long time, so her words carried a lot of weight. Shea stared at her in surprise, and Miledi said in a proud voice, “Long ago, there was a certain bunny girl who had the complete opposite personality of yours. If anything, you’re a lot more like the person that girl sacrificed her life to save. In a way, it’s like you’ve inherited the best traits of both of them. That’s why I’m not worried about you. Rabbitmen are already strong, and you’re the strongest among them. You have the strength to protect everyone *and* the cheerful disposition to make everyone smile. Since you’ve got both of those things, you’re invincible. Who knows, maybe you’re one of those girls’ distant descendants.”

She winked playfully as she added that last bit. Shea felt a warmth spreading in her chest.

“Thank you, Miledi-san,” she said in a genuine tone.

“Hm?”

“For living as long as you have, and for leaving your power behind for us. You’re right, I am invincible. After all, I’ve inherited your power and the powers of everyone who fought with you!”

Grinning, Shea flashed Miledi a peace sign.

Miledi turned away, embarrassed, and said in a grateful voice, “No, thank you. I’m glad...you guys were the ones who conquered our labyrinths.”

Liberator Myu’s New Friend?

*This short story contains spoilers, so it is recommended that you read it after finishing the volume.

“Graaaaaaaaah!” A tremendous roar rang out through the underground cavern at the bottommost floor of the Great Orcus Labyrinth. This was the room right before Oscar Orcus’s hut, which meant the roar could have only come from one creature.

“So this is the Hydra, huh? It sure is intimidating!”

“It’s too early to be quaking in your boots, Kaori. The many-headed form isn’t even that dangerous. It’s the final silver head that’s the real issue.”

The same monster that Hajime and Yue had nearly died to was once again staring down Hajime. The only difference was that Kaori was by his side instead of Yue. Hajime had come back here to prepare for the final battle, and now he knew the Hydra respawned just like every other monster in this labyrinth.

Of course, Hajime had already cleared this labyrinth, so the Hydra wouldn't spawn for him, but that wasn't the case for Kaori. Granted, so long as he was accompanying anyone who hadn't cleared it, he could still make it so the Hydra didn't spawn, but if that person stepped into the room alone, the Hydra would rear its many heads once more.

Chances were that even if Kaori defeated it alone, the magic circle wouldn't recognize her as someone who'd cleared the labyrinth since she hadn't gone through the whole thing, but that wasn't a problem. The reason Hajime had wanted to resummon it was so that he could analyze the silver head and its aurora breath more thoroughly. That way, he'd be able to come up with a countermeasure for Freid's strongest familiar, Uranos.

"Here it comes! Watch out for the black head—it'll make you see your worst nightmare!"

"What kind of evil ability is that?!"

The red, blue, and green heads fired out fire, ice, and wind breath attacks respectively, but Kaori easily dodged those by flying up into the air. Hajime also dodged them with ease by using his Aerodynamic.

"Yue took the black head's magic head-on and ended up rooted to the spot."

"She did?! Even though she has such high resistance to magic?!"

"Yeah. Apparently, the black head showed her visions of me abandoning her. It was honestly kind of cute how much she cried about it afterward."

"Stop bragging about how much she loves you! You're so insensitive, Hajime-kun!"

Burning with jealousy, Kaori fired a disintegration beam at the hydra's white head to vent her anger. The white head was in charge of healing, so the yellow head tried to defend it, but unfortunately disintegration magic was a bit too strong for this Hydra. The yellow head managed to hold off the beam for just a few seconds before it completely disintegrated. The white head simply couldn't heal fast enough, and once the yellow head was gone, the beam obliterated it as well.

Meanwhile, Hajime used his explosive bullets to take out the other heads. Thanks to the experience he'd gained during his travels, the ancient magic he'd acquired, and the advanced artifacts he'd been able to create with the ancient magic, not even the deadly Hydra posed a threat to him. The silver head popped out of the remains of the other heads, and this time Hajime was able to appreciate its majesty, since he wasn't fighting for his life. It really was an awe-inspiring beast worthy of going down in legend. The silver head glared menacingly at him.

"All right, time to hunt! I'm gonna harvest every last inch of that thing's head!"

"Umm, so I should sever it from the base of its neck, right?"

"Yep! I'm gonna dissect it, analyze it, isolate its individual components, and experiment on it every which way I can! We can see how it reacts to stimuli while it's alive later, so for now, let's just take the head back!"

The silver head stiffened in fear.

Is it just me, or are the challengers this time acting a little strange? Hang on, isn't that guy the one who beat me before? Why's he back? And why's he looking at me like a wolf who's spotted its prey? What's with that smile?!

The Hydra took a few steps back, terrified of Hajime.

“Heh, it’s pretty nice having a test subject that’ll just keep infinitely reviving.”

“Hajime-kun, if you keep this up, you’re going to get this novel an R rating.”

The Hydra could tell if it let itself be caught by this mad synergist, it would be suffering for a long, long time.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

It roared and unleashed its aurora breath in an attempt to drive Hajime away. Unfortunately, Hajime was far too strong for such a paltry attack to be effective anymore. Hajime killed and respawned the Hydra over and over and over again, collecting its heads and dissecting them with gusto...and that wasn’t even the worst of the humiliation it suffered.

“Daddy, the Hydra meat’s ready!”

Hajime killed it so many times that eventually he started a bonfire outside Oscar’s hut—even though there was a kitchen inside—and started eating grilled Hydra head for his meals. Of course, he was the only one who could. In the past, this meat had significantly boosted his stats and granted him the skill Limit Break, but of course, now he wasn’t getting any new stat boosts from it. Still, he was hoping if he ate enough of the Hydra’s meat, he could unlock the aurora breath skill that it used.

Eventually, the number of hydra kills reached double digits, and Myu—who’d become the pitmaster—had gotten so good at roasting hydra meat that she was now a master chef.

“—me...ill me...”

As she was roasting yet another Hydra head, Myu suddenly heard a voice.

“Huh? Wh-What was that?” she asked, stiffening up in surprise. The voice had come from surprisingly close by, so she looked around curiously, but there was no one there. *Was I just imagining it?* She cocked her head to one side, then went back to turning her spit roast and ensuring the Hydra was grilled to perfection.

“Kill...me...”

“There it is again!” Myu said with a start. She could make out the voice surprisingly clearly, considering Hajime and Kaori were making a ruckus as they hunted another Hydra in the room over. It almost felt as if—

“I’m talking directly inside your head?”

“Who is it?! Where are you?!”

“I’m right next to—Gyaaaaaaaaah!”

“What’s wrong?!”

With a pained scream, the voice faded away. At the same time, the silver head drooped.

Could it be? Myu thought hesitantly.

“Is that you, Hydra-san?” Myu asked. She could sense a nod inside her head in response. Myu had no idea why she could hear the Hydra’s voice when Hajime and Kaori clearly couldn’t, but she had an inkling of why it was talking to her. It probably wanted her to end this loop of eternal death and suffering. Myu hadn’t considered that the Hydra might actually possess intelligence and a will of its own, so now she suddenly felt guilty for cooking it so many times.

“But Hydra-san, you’ve already been killed so many times!”

Myu had no idea how killing it would help.

“Sorry, I was speaking figuratively there. I don’t actually want to die. Come on, can’t you read between the lines?”

“Oh, sorry,” Myu mumbled, her guilt fading a little, replaced by irritation. She then pursed her lips and asked, “Okay, then, what do you want me to do?”

“Just stop that crazy guy, please.”

“Did you just call my daddy crazy? Suddenly I don’t feel like helping,” Myu replied with her mother’s trademark smile.

“I’m sorry, please forgive me.”

The Hydra capitulated immediately, which was almost as much of a shock to Myu as it having sentience in the first place. It let out another scream as Hajime killed it again, then said, “Ugh, I am meant to be a trial and a guardian of the final floor! I don’t deserve to be treated like a lab rat! This isn’t faiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiir!”

The Hydra started crying, and Myu felt a twinge of sympathy for him. She poked her head out of the door of the Hydra’s room and called out to Hajime, saying, “Daddy! I think that’s enough! Hydra-san’s crying because you’ve killed him so much!”

“Ha ha, you’re too kind, Myu! Don’t worry though, monsters don’t have feelings! You’re just imagining things, Myu!”

“N-No, you’re wrong! I really heard Hydra-san’s voice in my head and...”

“Let me tell you something important, Myu!” Hajime said with a smile as he riddled the sixth head with holes.

“Some sacrifices have to be made for the greater good! And this monster is a sacrifice that needs to be made to protect you! Got it?”

“Uh-huh. You can keep going, then.”

“Good girl!”

Hajime had looked surprisingly serious when he'd said that, which had made Myu really happy. She went back to the cavern with the hut and looked up at the sky.

"I couldn't stop him," she said.

"So this is true despair..." a despondent voice echoed through Myu's head.

"Is there anything else I can do to help?" Myu asked, looking around for something she could do.

After thinking it over for a few minutes, the Hydra replied, "If you wish to help, young dagon, come closer."

Myu cocked her head, but she had a feeling she knew what the Hydra meant by closer. It wanted her to go in the direction the voice was coming from. She thought about telling Hajime what she was up to, but then the Hydra added, "Don't tell him...please... He'll experiment on me even further if you do..."

The Hydra's voice was so fearful that Myu couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

"Please help me. At least get me out of here. I'm begging you..."

"O-Okay, okay, I will, so stop crying!"

The traumatic experiences Myu had gone through had made her very sensitive at picking up on whether or not someone meant her harm or had any ill will, and as far as she could tell, the Hydra's pleading was genuine. Following his instructions, she made her way over to the river behind Oscar's hut. She then jumped into the water and swam to the bottom...where she found a small underwater cavern and a hole going deep into the ground at its center. She swam down the hole and followed the passageway until it opened up into a large area consisting of ten interconnected caves. The Hydra guided her down one of them, helping her navigate the mazelike series of

tunnels. She passed through several things that felt just like the teleportation portals Hajime made until she eventually reached her destination.

“Wow, it’s so pretty.”

Myu found herself in a vast room that was about as grand and imposing as the room where the Hydra spawned. Hundreds of cylindrical crystals were lined up in a row like pillars, and it felt like the Hydra’s voice was coming from them. Myu leaped up with a splash and ran over to one of them to look inside.

“Is that you, Hydra-san?”

“Indeed it is. This pain is unbearable though, so I—Gaaaaah!”

There was a Hydra inside the crystal, but it was as small as Myu. All seven of its heads were present, and it was coiled around itself with its eyes closed, as if it was sleeping.

“This is the core of the labyrinth, the place where the blueprints for all of its monsters are stored.”

The monsters of the labyrinth were able to respawn infinitely only within it, and it was all thanks to these blueprints that such a feat was possible. This complex system had been created by combining all seven ancient magics. The original Hydra had just been a small, four-meter-tall creature with only three heads that the Liberators had encountered while constructing their labyrinths. However, one of those Hydras had ended up as Vandre’s familiar and grown to possess a will of its own. It was that familiar that had served as the basis for the Hydra that now guarded Oscar Orcus’ house.

Unfortunately, using the original familiar as a groundwork for these cloned Hydras had weakened the original considerably. The Liberators had, of course, not wanted to rob any sentient creature of its freedom and allowed the familiar to leave if it wanted, but they had also granted it this crystal in case it wished to remain within the

labyrinth. This crystal was unlike the others, which just served as master copies for the monsters to be respawned; this crystal prevented the Hydra inside it from aging, as well as allowed it to share whatever sensations its clones felt and even provide them with mana or control them remotely if it wished.

Most of the time the Hydra had slept, waking only its consciousness and not its body whenever new challengers reached the final floor and remotely controlling its clones to serve as a proper trial. The Hydra had originally been created in ancient times to guard a certain treasure, but it had lost that treasure and been bereft of purpose until the Liberators had found it and given it a new duty.

After explaining its life story to Myu, the Hydra finally said, “Anyway, can you please let me out of here? I can’t stop feeling what my clones feel unless I leave this crystal. I’m tired of being skinned alive...”

“Wait, you can’t leave by yourself?”

If the Liberators had wanted it to be free, it would make sense that they would design the crystal in such a way that the Hydra could leave whenever it wanted.

“I’ve spent so long sleeping that I’ve forgotten how to wake up.”

It wasn’t the crystal trapping the Hydra inside, but rather his own body.

Was it really okay to make the final guardian such a lazy guy?

“Please erase part of the magic circle for me.”

“Will that wake you up?”

“No, it’ll unlock the crystal from the outside. I’ll still need your help to awaken.”

“Oh...” Myu mumbled, looking mildly disappointed. The Hydra was supposed to be some legendary monster, but right now it just

seemed pathetic. Nevertheless, she did as the Hydra asked and erased the part of the magic circle he specified.

A hole opened up in the crystal, exposing the Hydra's body to the outside world. Myu poked at its forehead, but it still didn't move.

"I need a stronger stimulus to awaken. You can even step on me if you want. In fact, I'd like it if you did."

Had the Hydra been a human, he definitely would have been branded a pedophile. Myu definitely did not feel like stepping on the Hydra, so she instead grabbed a pointy rock from nearby, opened the Hydra's eye, and stabbed it.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Hajime and Kaori stared in confusion as the Hydra in the trial room screamed in pain despite neither of them having done anything yet. Still, Myu's violent stimulus appeared to do the trick, as the Hydra woke up enough to move.

"I-I guess I should have expected that, considering how brutal your dad is. You can stop now, thanks."

"You're welcome!" Myu said with an innocent smile. She was completely unaware of the latent sadistic tendencies sleeping within her, which sent a shiver down the Hydra's spine.

"You can return now. It seems your daddy is finally done hunting me over and over now that I've started acting strange."

"Okay!" Myu replied and turned to leave. But she then remembered something and turned back. "Hydra-san, will you help us beat the evil god?"

"Mmm, I'm afraid I cannot, little dagon. My true body has been significantly weakened...and my clones cannot leave the trial room."

"I see. Sorry for asking the impossible." Myu then bowed to the Hydra, waved goodbye, ran over to the water, and jumped back in.

"At the very least, though, I will protect you so long as you remain here. It's the least I can do for the girl who freed me," the Hydra said as Myu began to swim away.

She turned back just before she was out of sight, smiled brightly at the Hydra, and replied, "Thanks! Hey, Hydra-san, after we beat the evil god and the world is peaceful, let's go outside! I'll take you to the western ocean! We can play with Akkun and Ry-san!"

"Play?"

"Yeah! Don't you want to live in the free world the Liberators wanted to make? We're friends, so I wanna invite you to my home!"

The Hydra thought about it for a few minutes. As a guardian beast, he wanted to stay close to the thing he was supposed to guard, but leaving didn't sound all that bad either.

"I'll think about it, young friend."

"Yay!"

With that, Myu swam away and out of sight. As the Hydra, of course, guided her safely back to Oscar's hut, he idly mused, "I wonder why it is that she was able to understand my words in the first place? She truly is a strange girl."

The Hydra's eyes glimmered with happiness.

As soon as Myu returned to the hut, she told Hajime all about the adventure she'd had, saying, "Daddy, I became friends with Hydra-san! He's really weak, but I wanna make him strong again. Is there anything I can do?"

Confused, Hajime replied, "Uhhh...isn't Hydra-san currently being roasted right in front of you?"

Hajime suddenly felt bad about beating the shit out of—and then eating—his daughter's newest friend.

The White Dragon's Hope

*This short story contains spoilers, so it is recommended that you read it after finishing the volume.

The first time I laid eyes on him, all I felt was fear. He had bloodred hair, dark skin, and dull yellow eyes. However, despite his youth, the demon man was lacking in vigor and seemed weary of life. And yet, my instincts screamed at me that he was too strong to beat.

“Are you alone?” he’d asked. Of course, at the time, I had no way of understanding speech, so I’d simply growled at him to try to make him back off. It was all bluster, though. I wouldn’t have been able to beat him even at my full strength, but at the time, I was sorely injured.

I’d been born as a wyvern in the frozen, mountainous forests of the south. Among monsters, I was one of the stronger ones. My parents, my siblings, and the rest of my flock were all brown with bark-colored scales, but mine alone were white. Perhaps because of that, I had abilities my fellows didn’t, and my body was much sturdier than theirs. The world was a vast place, however, and I’d learned that for the first time that day.

I was only a few months old at the time, and our flock had encountered a group of monsters so strong that we’d all been forced to flee. My parents had stayed back to buy us time, but they hadn’t lasted long, so I’d stayed back instead to try to hold them off for my siblings.

In the end, I hadn’t been able to do anything either, which wasn’t too surprising, since my tiny body was only as large as a human’s. Because of the natural poison that coursed through my veins, the monsters that had attacked us hadn’t eaten me, but because they hadn’t stopped to do so, they had been able to catch up to my siblings and were likely killing them right now.

I realized I wasn't strong enough to protect my turf or my flock. However, that was no reason to give up. Even though I knew I stood no chance against this man, I wouldn't go down without a fight. The man held his hand out toward me. Expecting a magic attack, I charged at him with what little strength I had left.

"Do you plan to fight, even with those injuries?" he asked as he pinned me down with chains of light before my claws could even approach him.

"I haven't seen scales like yours before. They're quite interesting." The man muttered something and once again held his hand out toward me. But then, he lowered it and slumped his shoulders in defeat. "What's even the point? What good will it do to make you my familiar now, when it's too late?"

The man looked defeated, as though he'd given up on everything and despised himself. In fact, it even looked like he was crying. It made me feel like a fool for preparing myself for a life-and-death struggle. Seeing that I'd also lost the will to fight, the man looked tiredly up at me. After a moment's hesitation, he turned his back and dispelled the chains holding me down. He reminded me of the old wyverns in my flock.

A moment later, I heard a scream coming from deeper inside the forest. It was one of my brothers!

"Uoooooooooooooh!"

Ignoring the fresh blood spilling from my wounds, I rose to my feet and howled. I had to let him know I was still alive, and that I was coming to rescue him. I rushed forward, even though I could feel my body growing colder with each step I took. Through sheer force of will, I made it to where I'd heard my brother scream. I found a few other members of my flock frozen either in fear or because their wounds were so severe they couldn't move. My brother was dead,

and I could tell by how mangled his corpse was that he'd fought until the bitter end.

"Graaaaaaaaah!"

Not caring if it cost me my life, I unleashed the strongest breath attack I could at the monsters that had eviscerated my flock—a swarm of giant eight-eyed spiders. My breath slammed into the spiders' leader, gouging out a chunk of its abdomen. However, that was all it did, and it was far from a fatal injury. All the strength left my limbs, and I collapsed to the ground. I couldn't move even the tip of my tail anymore. The spider let out a bloodcurdling scream and turned to look at me. The other spiders surrounded the rest of my flock to ensure they couldn't escape, while the spider boss slowly skittered over to me.

I let out a roar to signal that I was the angrier one. Even if there was no hope for my comrades to survive, so long as they were still alive, I had to keep fighting for as long as I could. After all, I was the future leader of the flock!

"What a surprise. So that's what drives you to fight, eh?"

I turned around in surprise and saw the man from earlier standing next to me.

"You know you can't win. Why didn't you run?" the man asked in confusion. The spiders seemed to be able to tell he was much stronger than they were as well, so they kept a wary distance from him. "That's what a true monster is like. You may possess special magic, but you still don't stand a chance against those things."

The man placed his hand on my forehead. I couldn't move, so I had no way of avoiding it, but even if I could have, I probably wouldn't have shied away from his hand. I didn't feel any malice coming from him. Instead, I felt a strange power surge through me as a series of images flowed from the man's mind into mine.

I saw him lamenting the endless war with the humans and the fact that their rapidly growing population meant that the demons were doomed to eventually lose. I saw that he was born into a military family and had watched his parents and siblings fight and die on the front lines. I saw that the demon empire's grand general had taken him in after he was orphaned and loved him as though he were his own son. I saw the man grow up, join the army, and hone his skills in order to repay his foster father for everything he'd done for him and to uphold his family's motto, "Protect the lives of our citizens."

I saw his foster father fall ill and the grief it caused him. I saw the Demon Lord tell him about the seven labyrinths that could grant miraculous powers to those who conquered them and that the Frost Caverns were one of those seven. The man seemed to believe that he could save his foster father with that miraculous power. I saw the man brave the labyrinth, nearly dying dozens of times and facing off against the ugliest parts of himself. He nearly lost his sanity multiple times, but his burning desire to save his foster father continued driving him onward.

Unfortunately, in the end, clearing the labyrinth only granted him the power to create familiars and the knowledge that God was evil. I saw that the man hadn't even managed to make it back home in time to be there when his foster father died, and was simply handed a will upon his return. Beaten down by the harshness of reality, I saw the man come here to the south to get some time alone for himself.

I heard another bloodcurdling scream from the spider, which snapped me back to my senses. I'd just been shown visions of the man's memories. The spider seemed to have run out of patience, so it fired a strand of web at me and the man. The web covered us entirely, but the man neither moved nor seemed to care. He was crying as if he'd finally accepted that the man he'd cared about was truly gone.

"I see...so you're the same as me...but you haven't given up."

I still couldn't understand the man's words, but it suddenly felt like I got the gist of what he was saying. It seemed he'd glimpsed through my memories as well.

"You're going to keep fighting as long as you have people to protect, aren't you? Even if it costs you your life."

I growled softly in assent. The spider's thread wrapped around us, restricting our movements. It then started closing in on us, clacking its fangs menacingly. The man and I ignored it, looking only at each other.

"I'm going to make you my very first familiar...no, my ultimate partner!"

The light returned to the man's eyes, and I could feel energy welling up within me. He gave me a questioning look, as if wondering whether or not I was okay with that, and I growled my assent immediately. A fearless smile appeared on the man's face, and I had no doubt I was making a similar expression.

Suddenly, a pillar of light enveloped me, and I was reborn. Naturally, the spiders stood no chance against the two of us.

"I want to become the guardian of my people, to make a country where they can live in peace."

The man transformed the surviving members of my flock into familiars as well, then held a burial ceremony for my dead brother.

"Thank you for reminding me of the promise I made to my family, and to my foster father. My name is Freid Bagwa...and I name you Uranos. It means 'protector of the skies' in the old tongue. Let's do our best to protect the people we care about, together."

"Uranos, it looks like the Irregular made it into the Sanctuary. The time to get our revenge has finally come."

Freid's words snapped me out of my reminiscing. Ever since he'd returned to the Demon Lord's castle, he'd been slowly growing crazier and crazier. I'd noticed the transformation too late, so now he'd been completely dominated by his new master. He couldn't even hear my thoughts properly anymore.

I'm sorry, partner. I couldn't protect your soul or your ideals. Still, even if you've forgotten about everything you once held dear, I'll protect your life until the very end. If... If somehow, these people actually manage to kill God and we're still alive, then maybe... Or if reincarnation truly does exist, I hope we can fly together under a sky free of this tyrannical God. When that day comes, I promise I'll take you anywhere you want with these wings.

Arifureta Magic Academy: Parents' Day

All of the elementary school students at the academy were a little on edge today, for this was their very first Parents' Day. This was a prestigious school, so both the parents and the students were a bit nervous. However, there was one class that was more confused than nervous.

"There will be no foolish wand-waving or silly incantations in this class," Yue said in a clear, beautiful voice, quoting a certain very famous book. Her golden-blonde hair was the same as usual, but she was dressed in a teacher's blouse and a tight skirt, and her boobs and butt looked a lot more voluptuous than normal. She had used metamorphosis magic to age herself up to her adult form, so now all of her seductive mannerisms were twice as effective. Honestly, the way she conducted herself wasn't very good for the kids' education, but both the children and the parents couldn't help but be captivated by her charms.

"Wait, I have a question! Beastmen need the help of magical tools to cast magic, so don't they *have* to wave wands around?"

“Besides, Yue-sensei, didn’t you say an incantation when you cast that weird ‘Hajime LOVE’ spell that blew away half the school? In that case, what’s wrong with incantations?”

“Incidentally, I recall that being aimed directly at me. Why was that?”

Kaori, Shea, and Tio spoke in quick succession. Hajime silenced them all with a smack to the back of their heads. There was a very good reason for why Hajime and the others were in this class, by the way.

Yue continued, “As such, I don’t expect many of you to appreciate the subtle science and exact art that is magic. However, for those select few who possess the predisposition, I can teach you everything you will ever need to know! In fact, I’ll look after your studies so diligently and thoroughly that you might even think I’m your mother!”

Yue-sensei winked at Myu, who was sitting on the centermost seat. Myu glanced awkwardly back at Remia—her real mother—in confusion.

Remia simply said, “Oh my,” and waved it off, but the rest of the peanut gallery wasn’t about to let that slide.

“That’s cheating! I can’t believe you went so far as to age yourself up to try to appeal to Myu-chan, Yue-sensei!”

“Yeah, we can all tell you’re trying to steal Remia-san’s position as her mom!”

“Besides, aren’t you in charge of a completely different class? What are you doing here?!”

While Hajime was more or less officially Myu’s dad, Yue, Shea, Kaori, and Tio were all here to vie for the right to be Myu’s mother. Of course, Myu already had Remia, but as far as Yue and the others were concerned, there was nothing wrong with Myu having more

than one mom. That was, of course, the logic they'd used when asked what they were doing in this class.

Naturally, no one had wanted to argue back for fear of what might happen to them, so now the four of them were here. Of course, student council president Shizuku and head teacher Freid had surrounded the classroom with the public morals committee in case anything went wrong. This was the main reason the people in this classroom were more confused than nervous. Hajime once again silenced the trio with a series of smacks to the head before Yue went on as if no one had said anything.

"I can teach you how to acquire fame through force, cast glory from the ether to laze about forever, and conquer death so that you can live eternally however you please."

None of that sounds like something you should be teaching.

"Myu!"

"Yesh?!"

Myu had been trying desperately to pretend like none of this was happening, so she answered with a start when called out.

"Let me ask you a question: what will happen to you once I've married your father?"

"I-I don't know."

"Another question, then: where would you look if I asked you to find me a grantz crystal?"

"I-I don't know."

"What's the difference between a first mother and a second mother?"

"Umm, I only have one mommy and she's—"

"Allow me to enlighten you."

Myu looked around wildly, searching for some means of escape. Her classmates watched her with sympathy while the other parents glared silently at Yue. They had lost any respect they might have had for her and just wanted her to get on with the class already. Unfortunately, Yue was so focused on Myu that she hadn't even noticed.

"First off, once I marry your father, you'll be happier than ever! And I'll be so happy I might die from happiness overload! A grantz crystal can be found in the Orcus Monster Hunter Park, and it's often used to make the rings people use to propose! And finally, there's no difference at all between a first mother and a second mother!"

Looking completely dead inside, Myu turned back to her mom and dad, entreating them silently for help.

"Mmm, that troubled face you make is just so cute! Ten points to Myu!"

"What points are you talking about?!" Myu asked, utterly bewildered.

"You'll get ten extra points on your next test," Yue replied with a playful wink.

She's clearly playing favorites... the rest of the class thought simultaneously.

"Y-Yue-sensei, please don't show favoritism to the students..." Myu said hesitantly.

"You're such a good kid! I'm moved! Another ten points to Myu!"

Myu gazed up at the ceiling, completely defeated. Her classmates didn't seem at all mad that she was getting preferential treatment, and were in fact consoling her. The parents also looked over at Remia sympathetically, but she mistook their concern as accusations

and timidly said, “Umm, Yue-sensei, you shouldn’t show preferential treatment to just my—”

“It’s fine, say no more, first mother!” Yue exclaimed, interrupting Remia’s words and lovingly patted Myu on the head. “I promise that I, the second mother, will teach her to the best of my abilities!”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.”

Remia’s expression turned serious, and she shook her head. However, Yue seemed completely oblivious to what Remia was trying to say. Fortunately, Kaori and crew were there to rush to Remia’s defense.

“I’m so disappointed I don’t even know what to say, Yue-sensei.”

“You’re a failure of a teacher. You should just go back to your home country.”

“Not only have you seduced one of our male students, but now you’re trying to corrupt a young girl?! This is one step too far! You’re fired!”

If they’d stopped there, they would have seemed like perfectly reasonable individuals, but then the three of them had to finish by saying, “And that’s why I’m best suited to be your second mother, Myu!”

Basically, they were no better than Yue. The three of them surrounded Myu and tried to show off why they were the best mother candidate. Yue naturally joined in while Hajime stood up to stop them. However, before he could do anything, Remia spoke up.

“Oh my, Ufu fu...”

She was smiling gently like usual, but she was emitting such an intimidating aura that Yue and the others immediately stopped fighting. Even Hajime and the other parents looked frightened.

“I’m very grateful that you all care so deeply about Myu. I’m sure she’s happy to have such kind mothers as well.”

Any normal mother would have gotten angry and told Yue and the others to cut it out, but they didn’t know how to respond to being thanked instead.

“Now, please continue the lesson, Yue-sensei.”

“But we haven’t decided who the second...”

Remia looked at Yue as though she was a petulant child, and Yue trailed off, too embarrassed to continue. She then headed back to the teacher’s podium, thoroughly chastised.

“Shea-san, Kaori-san, Tio-san, please step back. We’re just here to watch our daughter and her friends learn, isn’t that right?” Remia added.

“B-But—”

The three of them started to protest, but after seeing Remia’s smile, they immediately fell silent. Feeling guilty, the three of them dutifully returned to the back of the classroom. If Remia had yelled at them, they would have been able to argue back like they always did, but for some reason, they couldn’t stand up to her gentle smiles. As a result, class then proceeded quite smoothly. Soon after, rumors about Remia’s feats began spreading like wildfire through the school.

“She’s our messiah. Our school’s very own saint!” Freid said upon hearing the news. He was moved to tears upon learning that there was someone who could stop the destructive quartet.

From that day on, Remia was often called in to stop the destructive quartet with the power of her smiles, and Freid began a cult that worshipped her as a holy figure. That, of course, led to a conflict with the established church, but that is a story for another time.

Arifureta Fairy Tales: Sleeping Abyss’s Beauty

In a kingdom far, far away, a new princess was born. The king and queen had tried unsuccessfully to have children for a long time, so they were overjoyed to finally have a daughter. They threw a massive banquet for their adorable new baby, and the kingdom was in a festive mood. Many nobles came to the banquet to congratulate the king and queen as well, but it wasn't only nobles who came to the party.

"We heard a princess had been born, so the witches' cabal has come to personally offer our congratulations!"

"Where's the child?"

"We'll bless her for you!"

A group of witches broke their way into the banquet hall through the glass skylight. Surprised, the king said, "I didn't invite you!"

He hadn't invited them for good reason too. The witches' cabal was known for being a meddlesome, annoying bunch.

"I'm sorry my three idiots are causing such a ruckus," a witch with a ponytail said as she walked through the front door like a normal person.

There were twelve witches in total, and their motto was to live as freely as possible, so there were also men in the witches' cabal. At any rate, the queen desperately tried to keep her baby away from the witches, but they pushed their way through to her.

First, three witches and four warlocks blessed the princess with something called "ancient magic." It was quite the blessing, and everyone was amazed the witches would give such a gift. Next, a muscled man in bikini armor blessed the princess with an immortal body. Despite his eccentric appearance, the gift he bequeathed was also quite impressive, and the nobles all cheered. After that, the witch with a ponytail bashfully walked up to the princess and blessed her with a "maiden's heart." The witch herself was also quite cute

and innocent, so many of the men were waiting to ask for her hand in marriage after she was done. At this point, everyone was expecting the next few witches to also give the princess some amazing blessings. However—

“All right, then, I guess I’ll bless the princess with purity rivaling mine!”

“In that case, I’ll bless her with a mascot aura that’ll never go away!”

“Hmm, then I suppose I shall bless her with fetishes that shall make it easier for her to get close to the one she—”

“Guards! Guards, protect the princess from these heathens!” the king shouted. It was clear the “blessings” these three witches were trying to bestow were nothing more than curses.

Just then, a thirteenth uninvited guest showed up—the head of a group far more troublesome than the witches’ cabal.

“I heard there was a party so I, God, personally came down to join in the fun!”

He had possessed one of his apostles in order to descend onto the mortal world. But of course, everyone knew this God was bad news, so the king timidly said, “We’re all atheists, so...”

“You monsters! Do you realize how lonely I feel being excluded from all these events?! I’m super pissed now!”

God was quite the attention whore, and he cared about being included more than he cared about people worshipping him. In his wrath, he cast a curse on the newborn princess.

“When the princess turns sixteen, a light will shine down on her and her body will serve as the vessel for my soul for the next hundred years!”

Laughing maniacally, God left the banquet hall.

"Oh no..." the king said, cradling his head in his hands.

The self-proclaimed witch of purity suggested in a serious tone, "Why not hide the princess somewhere where there's no light until she's seventeen? Just to be safe, the three of us who haven't blessed her yet can look after her until then."

The divination witch and the guardian witch nodded in agreement, also looking surprisingly serious.

In a similarly serious tone, the king said, "Once the three of you have learned to have common decency, I might consider it."

The three witches retreated to a corner of the room, their pride wounded...though one of them seemed to be panting in excitement.

For the next seven days and seven nights, the king continuously held meetings with his advisers to try to find a solution to the curse. In the end, he couldn't think of anything better than what the three witches had suggested, so he ended up giving the princess into their care. Everyone knew that God had a massive ego and that if the appointed age passed without him managing to take over the princess, he'd be too embarrassed to try it again later. With a sour expression, the king handed his beloved daughter over to the three witches and prayed they didn't raise her into a weirdo.

Months, then years passed, and the day before the princess' seventeenth birthday arrived.

"Mmm... Tomorrow. I'll turn seventeen and will finally be able to go up to the surface. I can't wait to meet my mother and father," the princess said, her voice echoing through the abyss. She'd grown up into quite the beautiful lady.

"Princess, you can't just leave your room without telling anyone!"

"Tomorrow's a very important day, you know?!"

"We still haven't settled on which dress you should wear!"

The three witches who'd raised the princess came over in a huff.

"Mmm... I was just thinking about how this is going to be my last day down here," the princess said with a wistful smile. The bottom of the abyss was surprisingly comfortable, with a large mansion that was surrounded by nature. The three witches' expressions clouded over.

"Is there really any reason to feel attached to a place devoid of natural light, especially since you've been forced to stay down here?"

There hadn't been any other way to save the princess from the curse, but the witches still felt bad about keeping the princess here. Some of the other members of the witches' cabal were trying to kill God, but they were having trouble making progress. The three witches felt embarrassed that their own lack of strength was causing so many problems for the princess.

The princess looked away bashfully and said, "No matter where I am, what matters is that I'm with people who care about me. Because I've always had you three by my side, I've never felt like I was unfortunate. You guys are my family. Thank you so much for everything, you three. I want us to be together even after I go back to the castle. I l-l-love you guysh!"

The princess was so embarrassed she tripped over her words. Covering her face with both hands, she ran away to the teleporter room, leaving three shocked witches behind.

"I've made up my mind. I'm not going to let anyone marry our princess. In fact, I think we should lock her up here forever..."

"Excuse me, she's too cute for you. If anything, I'm the one who deserves to be her wife."

"If I can spend the rest of my days as her pet, then I will have no regrets in life..."

Lascivious smiles spread across the three witches' faces. Meanwhile, the princess was having quite the adventure.

"I-I've finally met my prince charming!"

She'd run into an unconscious man at the bottom of the abyss and fallen in love with him at first sight. He was armed with weapons she'd never seen before, had white hair, an eyepatch, and a prosthetic arm. A normal person wouldn't have been immediately enamored with a guy who looked like that, but this was fated. Without a moment's hesitation, the princess bundled him up and took him back with her. The three witches were waiting for her when she returned from the teleporter, but their warm gazes immediately turned to glares when they saw what she was carrying.

"Who's that man? I thought you said you loved *us*!"

The self-proclaimed witch of purity had transformed into the yandere witch of jealousy, but the princess didn't seem to notice, and she said while blushing, "I found my husband."

"Put him back where you found him right this instant."

"I promise I'll make him happy! Please let me keep—I mean, marry him!"

"If you want to keep a pet, keep me! I'm much better than that man you don't even know anything about!"

The witches tried to pry the man from the princess' grasp, but in the process, they got a good look at his face and also fell for him at first sight. Truly, fate was a powerful force.

"Hm? What's wrong, you three? Why are your faces so red?"

"Princess, please listen," the yandere witch said in a gentle voice. "There's actually someone you were engaged to at birth, so please give up on marrying this man."

"Huh? I never heard about that."

“It was supposed to be a surprise. We wanted to make the reveal a special moment.”

“It may be a politically motivated engagement, but the prince is a good man. I promise he’ll make you happy.”

Five minutes ago, the witches had been talking about how they’d never let any man take the princess, but now they were trying to marry her off.

In a surprisingly evil tone, the yandere witch said, “Princess, it’s your duty as a member of the royal family to marry for the good of the kingdom. You don’t want to abandon your duty, do you?”

“Sorry, but I’m never marrying any man other than this one,” the princess said with a flat stare. Sighing, the three witches squatted down and started clapping in sync.

“Political marriages are your duty! Political marriages are your duty! You must fulfill your duty!”

They were now chanting together in an attempt to hypnotize(?) the princess into giving up on this man. It was then that the princess realized that the three of them must have fallen for him as well.

“I’m sorry, but it appears we must part ways today. This abyss will be your grave!” she said, golden light flaring around her. The princess was ready to kill her adoptive mothers whom she’d claimed to love to keep her new husband.

In the end, God threw away his pride and came down to possess the princess anyway and put her in a deep sleep, but the young man and the three witches worked together to wake her up with a kiss. Once she’d returned to consciousness, the princess went after God with a vengeance, killing him instantly. Afterward, she tried to marry the man, but her father—the king—was against it, so she stole the throne from him and became queen.

“I’m going to make a country of me, by me, and for me.”

After that, the princess lived happily ever after with her beloved husband and the three witches, whom she loved almost as much.

To Awaken or Not to Awaken

**This short story contains spoilers, so it is recommended that you read it after finishing the volume.*

This is a story about something that happened shortly after Tio had returned from her home village.

“Tio, I’ve finished making all of your equipment,” Hajime said, pulling out the artifacts he’d made for her.

“Oooh! So after stripping me bare and toying around with me, you’ve finally dyed me in your color!”

“Please don’t word it like that,” Hajime replied with a glare as he handed her a black whip.

“We don’t have much time, so hurry up and get into the Hour Crystal zone and transform.”

“Oh, yes, I suppose we don’t.”

The two of them were currently on the fortress’ rooftop. Shea, Kaori, many of Hajime’s classmates, and quite a few dragonmen and human soldiers were in a corner next to the Hour Crystal. They were all trying to get used to the artifacts Hajime had made for them as quickly as possible.

Tio had told Hajime all about the new skills she’d acquired via telepathy as she’d been flying to her home village, so he’d had time to prepare new artifacts to match her new abilities. Unfortunately, Tio wouldn’t have much time to get used to them before the decisive battle began. Her expression turned serious and Hajime released the wyverns he’d captured with his Monster Orbs into the sky. They

were all shackled, and they growled weakly as they strained against their restraints. The people on the roof shivered in fear. Those wyverns were exceptionally strong, so much so that they could kill most people down below with ease.

“They’re wyverns from the labyrinth. Pretty lively, right?”

“Indeed, it looks like they will make for powerful familiars,” Tio replied as she brandished her whip, staring intently at the wyverns.

“How does it feel?” Hajime asked.

“Perfect. I can control it freely, since it has my scales in it.”

“Oh, so it really is a weapon for Tio. And here I thought that was just what Hajime-kun was into...” Kaori commented.

“I’d ask how you even came to that misunderstanding, Kaori, but I guess this isn’t anything new for you. I do want to know why you’re blushing and looking like you’re eager for me to whip you, though.”

Kaori looked away, embarrassed. Apparently, she was willing to go along with any fetish Hajime had, no matter how extreme it was. Shea, Shizuku, and Aiko all looked similarly embarrassed while Hajime’s classmates stared at them in disgust.

“He he, it will be nice to have more comrades,” Tio said as she wrapped her whip around the first of the wyverns and transmitted her mana to it. “...Hrm, this is more difficult than I initially anticipated.”

“It’s your first time, so don’t rush it,” Hajime said, and Tio nodded.

As she continued her attempts to transform the wyvern, she suddenly remembered something. “Oh yes, Master. I have something to tell you. I acquired an unexpected trump card when I went home.”

“Oh? Did you inherit some ancient legendary treasure passed down among the dragonmen?” Hajime asked in a joking tone. Upon seeing

Tio's cheeky smile, however, he realized he'd been right on the mark and raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"The truth is..." Tio trailed off, then went on to explain everything about her ancestor's scale and how she'd found out about it.

When she finished explaining everything, Hajime said in a surprised voice, "Damn. So you actually got a trump card at the last minute, huh?"

"That I did. It is rather difficult to activate, but I'm certain it will be of great use."

Hajime lapsed into thought for a few seconds, then asked in a curious voice, "Do you think that forced transformation that amplifies your rage and strips away all reason is actually concept magic?"

"Hm? My apologies, I must have been misleading with my explanation. This power is quite similar to concept magic, but I do not think it is related."

If it was, that would have meant that Tio's ancestor had acquired all seven ancient magics and learned the truth about Ehit. And if that were true, there was no way that story wouldn't have been passed down through Tio's family line. And yet, it had been Tio's grandfather who'd been the first to discover Ehit's evil plot.

"My ancestor apparently possessed a very powerful special magic that was a cross between metamorphosis and spirit magic."

Tio suspected he'd used that special magic to encode his grudge, the knowledge of how to perform the ultimate transformation, and a piece of his soul into his scales. Every dragonman's soul was imbued with the dragonification factor that allowed them to transform, so putting that plus a hidden, deep-seated grudge into an inanimate object made it seem like it was concept magic despite being fundamentally different.

Nodding in understanding, Hajime said, “I see. So basically, just like how the Haulias have Shea, your family also had someone with insane special magic.”

That might have been why Tio’s ancestor’s wife was killed, actually.

Hajime could easily see Ehit driving the man who’d brought peace to a kingdom into a fit of rage and making him go down in history as a monster.

Noticing Tio’s expression, Hajime smiled sadly and said, “I guess we must seem similar to you.”

“Indeed,” Tio said with a troubled face.

Of course, Hajime and Tio’s ancestor had been wildly different people. Her ancestor had devoted his life to helping people and building a peaceful nation, while Hajime had been willing to kill anything in his way if that was what it took to protect the people important to him. However, both Hajime and Tio’s ancestor had been equally devoted to the person they loved most, hence why Tio’s ancestor had eventually gone crazy when his wife had died and devolved into nothing more than a beast. It was similar to how Hajime had decided that this world was worthless and created concept magic chains that could erase anything and everything.

“In the depths of his grudge, I felt despair that stemmed from an overwhelming love. My ancestor’s rage and hatred was so powerful that it could still curse his descendants millennia later.”

Tio looked down sadly, and Hajime gently put a hand on her shoulder.

“But you were able to overcome that grudge. Isn’t that proof that your ancestor’s pain has finally been laid to rest? I’m sure the reason he quieted down was because your determination to kill Ehit and change the world got through to him.”

It was rare for Hajime to say something sentimental like that, so Tio blinked at him in surprise. But then, she smiled and asked, “Do you really think so?”

“I do,” Hajime replied with an affectionate smile, and the two of them looked into each other’s eyes for a few minutes. The onlookers started whispering furiously to each other upon seeing Hajime and Tio flirting for real for the first time, prompting Tio to blush in embarrassment.

Clearing her throat, she said in a serious voice, “Master, this isn’t working. I cannot control my mana well enough through the whip, nor can I saturate it with the amount I need. If I had more time, I might be able to utilize it more efficiently, but... We don’t have the time for that! Master, I require encouragement!”

“I guess it’s fine...” Hajime said as Tio handed him her whip. The onlookers watched on curiously as Tio dropped to all fours and wiggled her butt at Hajime like a dog.

Hajime raised the whip high and yelled, “Hurry up and learn how to use my artifact, you hopeless pervert!”

The whip hit Tio’s ass with a satisfying thwack.

“Aaaaaaaaaahn! Thank you so muuuuuuch!” Tio moaned, not caring that people were watching. Or perhaps that just made it more pleasurable for her.

“A-Are they really doing this out in the open?” Aiko asked in shock.

“P-Princess, you mustn’t! Nagumo-dono, please stop this at once!” Venri, Tio’s old wet nurse, shouted as she ran in to try to stop Hajime.

“Don’t stop him, you two! This is necessary to save the world!” Tio exclaimed. She was so confident in her assertion that Aiko and Venri couldn’t help but think maybe she was in the right.

Thus, everyone watched on as Hajime whipped Tio, who moaned in pleasure with every lash. A few of the guys ended up popping boners and made an awkward exit to try to hide them, while Venri curled up in a corner and started crying. Shea and Kaori tried to console her, but it was no use.

“Here it coooooooooomes! I’m ready!”

Looking ecstatic, Tio took the whip back from Hajime and once again twined it around one of the wyverns.

“Ngyaaaaaaaaah!”

Screaming, the wyvern transformed into a black dragon.

“Mwa ha ha ha ha ha! I’ve never felt better in my life!”

Thanks to her Pain Conversion skill, Tio’s stats were much higher than usual. She split her whip into multiple tails and launched them at the remaining wyverns, who were so shocked by their comrade’s transformation that they didn’t even try to dodge. One of the wyverns looked over at Adul for salvation, but Adul simply gave it a pitying look.

“Save me, please!” the wyvern seemed to be saying.

“I-I’m sorry, but this is for the sake of the world...” Adul replied, averting his gaze awkwardly.

The wyvern’s eyes filled with despair as one of Tio’s whip tails wrapped around it.

“Oh no, this is so enjoyable that it might awaken another fetish in me!” Tio exclaimed, blushing as she watched the wyverns’ futile attempts to escape her whip.

“Damn, Tio’s pretty sadistic,” Hajime said in an approving voice.

“We don’t wanna hear that from you!” everyone else replied in unison.

The March of Civilization!

Explosion after explosion echoed through the air above the fortress where the decisive battle for Tortus would be fought, and a sea of monsters was mercilessly ripped apart. The people down below watched in awe, their jaws slack.

“And that’s how you use the artifacts I’ll be giving you for the final battle.”

The soldiers snapped back to their senses after hearing that cold voice, and Emperor Gahard gulped. The soldiers of the world had just watched a recorded lecture on how to use a vast array of weapons that could unleash ungodly destructive power at unbelievable speed from an unfathomable distance with the mere pull of a trigger.

If technology like this spreads, not only will it revolutionize the way war is waged, it'll change the entire world.

Gahard shivered in fear. He was watching the recording from his special seat atop the fort’s roof, and he looked down to see his men chattering excitedly. Sitting next to him were influential members of other nations, including Volpen, the kingdom’s best synergist.

Volpen and his engineers weren’t a cause for concern. Well, the fact that they were staring at the recording with bloodshot eyes and such intense concentration that they forgot to breathe was a bit of a problem, but not the one Gahard was worried about. The actual problem was that all the other world leaders were suspiciously eyeing each other, wondering if they could use these new weapons to keep their rivals in check.

Can't you guys save your squabbling for after we've beaten Ehit?

Gahard couldn’t really blame them, though. Anyone with that arsenal at their disposal could easily rule the world.

"These weapons will be quite useful against *our true enemy*, won't they?" Liliana said in a powerful voice, and all the world leaders turned to her. She was smiling, but that smile didn't reach her eyes.

Upon seeing her pointed glare, they broke out into a cold sweat. It was clear that they'd be eliminated if they opposed Liliana. A lot of the world leaders had been unsure whether it was wise to appoint a fourteen-year-old girl as the leader of the world alliance, no matter how skilled she might be. But after seeing how strong-willed she was, they could see why she'd been chosen. Liliana did make a good point as well. Unless they defeated Ehit, their true enemy, there wouldn't be any future where they could fight each other for supremacy over Tortus.

"Th-That's the end of the weapons explanation video," Aiko said timidly. Hajime had chosen her to be the one in charge of explanations since she was from Earth and had a baseline understanding of the weapons he'd made. He'd also given her some supplementary materials in case anyone asked more complex questions, but Aiko was still nervous giving a lecture to a group of world leaders. Of course, as a teacher, she did feel like this was her duty and not something she should leave to any of her students, but seeing her try so hard mostly just made the audience smile.

"Umm, next, I'll be explaining how all of our communication and information gathering toolsh work."

She bit her tongue at the end there and blushed furiously in embarrassment. Still, she dutifully gave the signal to Yuka to roll the next video. Smiling, Yuka turned to her assistants Nana and Taeko, who went around the audience handing out palm-sized crystals to everyone. Meanwhile, Atsushi brought out a larger crystal that he placed on a stand.

"The crystals we've given all of you are communication devices that can transmit video as well as sound. You operate them like this..."

Aiko took a small bird-shaped scouting plane out of her Treasure Trove and sent it into the air.

“Whoa, I can see what it sees in here!” Gahard exclaimed, looking down at his crystal.

“That’s right. Now please push on the magic circle at the crystal’s tip and say, ‘Switch over.’”

Everyone did as Aiko instructed, then gasped in surprise.

“Is that the palace?!” Kuzeli shouted.

“I’m looking at the Sacred Mountain in mine!” the new pope, Simon, said.

“I see my capital here!” Lanzwi said.

“The enemy said they’d come from the Sacred Mountain, and Hajime-kun doesn’t think his words can be trusted, so he’s sent out scouting mini-golems all across Tortus. What you’re seeing are the images from them.”

Aiko then went on to explain how they could be used to telepathically communicate as well, and demonstrated by talking to Yuka.

Smiling gently, Liliana walked up to Aiko and said, “How much would it cost to monopolize these?”

“Hey!” the other world leaders shouted.

Who was it that said we should focus on the battle ahead of us first?! You’re the one who’s trying the hardest to come out on top here!

In truth, these communication artifacts were far more valuable than the weapons Aiko had shown off earlier. Information was power, and these artifacts could gather the most information of all. Aiko staggered backward, afraid of the dangerous gleam in Liliana’s eyes.

However, Liliana grabbed her shoulder, preventing the poor teacher from escaping.

“Aiko-san! Once the battle is over, please ask Hajime-san to sell only our kingdom these communication devices! We’re both members of the ‘We want to be Hajime-san’s wives’ alliance, aren’t we?”

“H-Huh?”

“Don’t think you can steal a march on us, you sneaky princess!” Gahard shouted.

“Now that simply isn’t fair, Princess Liliana!” Lanzwi said, looking outraged.

“Please stop, we need to focus on the final battle!” Aiko said tearfully.

“If you want us to focus, how about you promise monopoly rights to whichever country performs the best in the upcoming battle?!”

“That’ll just give a military nation like yours an unfair advantage!”

“Yeah, you empire warmongerers should just stay quiet!”

The explanation session devolved into chaos as every country’s leader tried to secure an advantage for themselves.

“Man, I can’t help but think humans are disgusting creatures when I see stuff like this.”

“Honestly, it was kind of a shock seeing Lily be the first one to get corrupted.”

“I guess Lily’s always been a shrewd politician.”

Nana, Yuka, and Taeko watched on sadly as the world leaders squabbled.

“N-Nana?! Yuka and Taeko too?! I-It’s not what you guys think! I know we’ll win! That’s why I was trying to do my duty as a ruler and—”

“Cut it out already, you guys—Soul’s Repose!”

Aiko cast spirit magic on everyone to force them to calm down; they quieted down immediately. She then folded her arms menacingly and said, “Every second counts, so stop wasting time! We have an important battle ahead of us, and I will not condone any bickering! Sit down and listen!”

The various kings and queens meekly sat back down, looking like chastised students in a classroom. Aiko could be as imposing as Liliana when she needed to. The soldiers watching from a distance started worshipping Aiko even more upon seeing how easily she cowed the rulers of the world.

Meanwhile, Aiko brought out a whole slew of artifacts, each of which would be enough to revolutionize the world of Tortus on its own. There were the Skyboards, which enabled flight for everyone; the magic-powered cars that could transport large amounts of goods and serve as mobile walls to protect vulnerable positions; a fake sun that could change night into day; and many many others. All of the artifacts were so amazing that the world rulers forgot their promise to focus on the battle at hand and were about to start competing over who would monopolize this technology.

However, before they could say anything to Aiko, Volpen muttered, “So this is the march of civilization...”

Everyone turned to him, and then gasped in surprise when they saw that he was sobbing.

“This is the march of civilization,” he repeated.

“The march of civilization! The march of civilization! The march of civilization!” his craftsmen started chanting, tears streaming down

their faces as well. For them, just seeing these new ideas was invaluable. They were fired up by the idea of creating modern inventions of their own.

“I’ve been enlightened! Our civilization will surely climb to even greater heights! Gah ha ha ha ha!”

It almost looked like Volpen had found God, and the world leaders all calmed down, even though they hadn’t been hit with a Soul’s Repose. They suddenly realized how they must have seemed to the onlookers.

Needless to say, Aiko had to cast multiple Soul’s Reposes on Volpen before he returned to normal.

Kaori’s First Job

All of Hajime’s classmates had returned from their trips as ambassadors to the various nations of Tortus, so they were now gathered in the capital’s plaza. Kaori, who’d been serving as Hajime’s assistant while he prepared for the coming battle, had come up to the surface to accomplish a new task.

“Kaori!”

“Yuka-chan!”

Yuka, who’d been put in charge of the students not with Hajime, ran over to Kaori with a smile on her face.

“What are you doing up here? Are your preparations done?” Yuka asked as she watched an insane amount of artifacts get teleported into the plaza from a nearby portal. A group of people was working nonstop to sort and distribute them.

“Not yet, but Hajime-kun’s about to start working on your guys’ artifacts, so I came here to ask if you have any requests.”

“Oh, I see,” Yuka replied, taking the stack of papers Kaori handed her.

“Oh, and he sent like...samples I guess? Test artifacts to see if you guys like any of the things he came up with.”

Yuka was a little suspicious about Kaori’s choice of words, but she nevertheless called her classmates over.

“Yo, Kaoricchi. Is it true that we get to test Nagumocchi’s artifacts?”

“If we like them, he’ll make custom versions for us, right?”

Nana and Taeko looked excited as they asked about the artifacts. The rest of Yuka’s classmates gathered soon after.

“Kentarou and Tsuji’s artifacts have been super helpful, so I’m looking forward to what he makes for the rest of us,” Jugo said.

“Yeah, the fortress is getting built at record speed, and Ayako’s healing is as good as yours was before you went off with Nagumo, Kaori-chan,” Mao added.

This was why the students were so excited. Kentarou Nomura, the geomancer, and Ayako Tsuji, the healer, had both been given artifacts by Hajime ahead of time, and they’d been able to accomplish an insane amount with them. However, Kaori now looked away, clearly uncomfortable, almost as if Hajime’s samples weren’t what the students were expecting.

“Umm, just so you know, Hajime-kun has a very *unique* sense of aesthetics, so please don’t think he was just fooling around when he made these. He was really serious about all of them, okay?!”

Yuka and the others cocked their heads in confusion while Kaori opened up her Treasure Trove and took the samples out. The first thing that appeared was a giant fish.

“...”

The students all fell silent, as did the onlookers who'd come to see what was going on.

"That's...a fish, right?" Yuka asked timidly.

"It is," Kaori replied, averting her gaze.

"Why a fish?!" Atsushi and the others shouted in unison.

Panicking a little, Kaori took a memo pad out of her pocket and said, "Uhhh, apparently, this is a legendary weapon that once defeated the dagon race's best warriors."

"What the fuck is Nagumo doing to the poor dagons?!"

"Originally, this was just a fish, but—"

"So it's just a plain old fish?!"

"I said *originally*, okay?! Hajime-kun upgraded it to be as hard as steel! It can also emit mana shock waves and fire water lasers from its mouth! The idea is to demoralize your enemies with it by making them think they're pathetic for letting themselves get beat up by a fish! You can only get this now for a limited time! Any takers?!"

"Why do you sound like a door-to-door salesman?" Yuka asked.

"If that artifact's so good, why doesn't Nagumo use it himself?" Nana asked, bringing up a good point.

Averting her gaze once again, Kaori explained, "Because Yue and I said it stinks."

Well, duh! the students thought in unison, backing away from the fish.

"Umm...is there anyone who wants to try using it? Yeah, okay, I guess not."

With dead eyes, Kaori mechanically brought out the next sample artifact.

“Our next item for sale is...”

“Hey, Kaori, did Nagumo write that memo? Do you have to read it out exactly?”

“He said it’d be a shame if people judged his artifacts based on their appearance alone, so he wanted me to hype them up beforehand...”

“That doesn’t mean you have to...I guess you can’t refuse the man you love, huh?”

Kaori said nothing, but it was clear from her expression that Yuka was right on the money.

Nagumo, what exactly are you making your girlfriend do? the other students thought with a shake of their heads.

“Anyway, feast your eyes on these glasses!” Kaori said in a voice tinged with desperation. She’d taken out a pair of fashionable red-rimmed glasses. She put them on, and the glasses lovers among the students *hnnnged* extremely hard. Everyone knew Kaori had eyes only for Hajime, but she was still one of the prettiest girls in their school, so they couldn’t help but be charmed by her cuteness. Shinji, who was one of the biggest glasses fans, staggered over to Kaori like a brainwashed zombie.

“They might look like regular glasses, but if you press on the magic circle on the side here and say—”

Before Kaori could say whatever the incantation was to activate them, the glasses flashed and twin beams of light shot between Shinji’s legs, grazing his balls. Looking down, Shinji saw two smoking holes in the floor that appeared to go all the way down to the bottom of the abyss.

Shinji stiffened up in fear, while Kaori got all flustered and said, “Th-They’ll shoot out laser beams! You can catch people by surprise with this unexpected weapon! Occasionally, the beams misfire and

activate on accident, but at least the glasses won't break even if you sit on them! If you buy them now, you can get them in the color of your choice! We have black, silver, red, and white!"

"No one cares how many colors they come in!"

Unsurprisingly, no one wanted a weapon that could randomly misfire. Yuka didn't even need to ask why Hajime wasn't using this one. Massaging his balls, Shinji scurried backward.

"N-Next, we have everyone's favorite bludgeoning weapon from *Kayo Suspense*, the ashtray!"

"That's not a bludgeoning weapon in the drama!" Atsushi said.

"Of course, this isn't just any normal ashtray! It'll knock out the soul of anyone you hit with it, separating their spirit and their body!"

"Nagumocchi's gone mad, hasn't he?" Taeko asked.

"How about this, onii-san? Don't you think this crowbar is magnificent? It's perfect for taking down zombies. If you buy it now, we'll throw in a chainsaw as a free bonus!"

"B-Being called 'onii-san' by Shirasaki-san feels really weird..."

"Also, wait, did you say 'buy'? We have to pay for these?"

"If anything, I think the free gift is more useful than the actual artifact."

Keeping up the salesman persona to the very end, Kaori brought out more and more of Hajime's strange artifacts. There were tears in her eyes by the end, and some of the students had thought to pick up a few of the artifacts just out of sympathy, but unfortunately, they all had strange designs or fundamental flaws.

Unable to bear watching this any longer, Yuka put a comforting hand on Kaori's shoulder.

“Y-Yuka-chan? Umm, what’s wrong? Do you want this jet-propulsion broom that any self-respecting magical girl wouldn’t be caught dead without?”

“It’s okay, Kaori, you can stop now,” Yuka said with a smile, and Kaori fell silent.

Yuka then turned back to her classmates and said, “All right, that was probably just Nagumo’s way of trying to ease our tension. But bad jokes aside, everyone write down what you want your artifact to have on this notepad! He told us to start thinking about this a while back, so I’m sure you guys already know what you want your artifact to look like and what abilities you want it to have, right? We don’t have much time, so hurry up and get writing!”

Yuka clapped her hands, and her classmates dutifully started scribbling onto the notepad.

“Kaori, can you please tell Nagumo to get rid of all these joke weapons?”

“O-Okay. I will. Yuka-chan, you’re amazing...”

Impressed by Yuka’s leadership, Kaori started stowing all of Hajime’s joke weapons and waited for her classmates to finish writing on the notepad.









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by Ryo Shirakome

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